



**G.K snippets...**

- India will start its **8th stint as a non-permanent member** of the UN Security Council. There are five permanent members - USA, UK, France, China and Russia. [Further Readings](#)

**Law, Policy and Governance**



Daily snippets

**1. [Vaccine close to approval, hints DCGI](#)**

- **V.G. Somani**, Drug Controller General of India (DCGI), indicated at a webinar that the country was close to approving a COVID-19 vaccine. The PM warns of the need for people to remain vigilant.

**2. [Kangana committed 'grave violation of plan' while merging flats : Court](#)**

- Actor Kangana Ranaut violated the sanctioned plan while merging her three flats, a civil court in Mumbai remarked while rejecting her plea seeking to restrain the Mumbai civic body from demolishing the unauthorised construction.

- Judge L.S. Chavan noted in the order that Ms. Ranaut, who owns three flats on the fifth floor of a 16-storey building in Khar, merged them into one. In doing so, she covered the sunk area, duct area, common passage and converted free Floor Space Index into a habitable area. *"These are grave violations of the sanctioned plan for which the permission of the competent authority is required,"* said the court.

**3. [Assam's doubtful citizens get a centre to learn their rights](#)**

- Aditpur is a village, about 20 km from western Assam's Barpeta town, is teaching the Constitution of India to "doubtful" Indians who are unlikely to have heard of it. "Assam has over 5 lakh people who are being deprived of their citizenship rights because of having been struck off voters' list and being slapped with notices as suspected foreigners, the Sambidhan Kendra, probably the first of its kind in India, is an effort to make such people aware of their citizenship rights,".

- 100 volunteers have teamed up with lawyers to arm the people with knowledge about the Constitution, the centre with enough space for 30 people also organises an assembly of advocates and aspiring lawyers to update

on cases of D-voters and suspected foreigners being handled, and motivate each other to help “victims of the system” get justice.

#### 4. [Assam throws a lifeline to its only Ramsar site](#)

- The Kamrup (Metropolitan) district administration has prohibited community fishing in **Deepor Beel**, a wetland on the south-western edge of Guwahati and Assam’s only Ramsar site.
- “Some people from the Villages around and adjoining Deepor Beel Wildlife Sanctuary in tandem with people from various fringe parts of Guwahati city are likely to venture out to organize community fishing on January 3. Such ventures are absolutely illegal under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which will also cause irreparable as well as irretrievable damage to the ecosystem of the sanctuary,” mentioned the order.
- **Deepor Beel** was designated a Ramsar site in 2002 for sustaining a **range of aquatic life forms besides 219 species of birds**. A Ramsar site is a wetland designated to be of international importance under the Convention on Wetlands on **February 2, 1971**, in the Iranian city of Ramsar.

#### 5. [Centre should back Maratha reservation in the Supreme Court : Ashok Chavan](#)

- Maharashtra Public Works Department Minister Ashok Chavan said the Centre should come out in support of reservation for the Maratha community in the Supreme Court. In September 2020, the Supreme Court stayed the implementation of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Act that granted quota to the Maratha community in jobs and education in the State.
- Mr. Chavan, who heads a Cabinet sub committee on the quota, demanded that the Centre include the **Maratha quota law in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution**, so as to preclude its judicial review.
- **What is the Ninth Schedule?** The **Ninth Schedule** contains a list of central and state laws which cannot be challenged in courts. Currently, 284 such laws are shielded from judicial review. The **Schedule** became a part of the **Constitution** in 1951, when the document was amended for the first time. However, the Supreme Court has mentioned that it is not outside the purview of judicial review subject to conditions.

#### 6. [Repeal law permitting seizure of livestock: SC](#)

- The Supreme Court asked the Centre to “delete” its three year old law which allowed seizure and subsequent confiscation of livestock from people who depended on these animals for a livelihood, even before they were found guilty of cruelty towards them.
- A Bench led by **Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde** warned the government that it would “stay” the implementation of a 2017 law. In short, a farmer, a livestock owner or a cattle trader loses his animals before being found guilty of the charge of cruelty.

#### 7. [DoE circular asks teachers to check weight of school bags](#)

- The Directorate of Education has issued a circular asking schools to follow the new ‘**School Bag Policy, 2020**’ released by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). According to the circular, school teachers should inform the students in advance about the books and notebooks to be brought to school on a particular day and frequently check their bags to ensure that they are not carrying unnecessary material.
- To reduce the weight of the school bag, the circular says that it is the duty and the responsibility of the school management to provide quality potable water in sufficient quantities to all the students in the school so that they do not need to carry water bottles from their homes. The heavy school bag has severe/adverse physical effects on growing children which can cause damage to their vertebral column and knees, the circular reads.

#### 8. [NHRC flags misreporting of scavenging data](#)

- The National Human Rights Commission recommended action against government officials responsible for incorrectly reporting the number of manual scavengers in the country.

#### 9. [Budget session to be held amid curbs](#)

- The budget session of Parliament is expected to be held under similar COVID-19 safety measures and restrictions. The Parliament is expected to be convened in the fourth week of January. The Budget as a norm is presented on February 1. There is no clarity on whether the **Question Hour** which was suspended will resume in the budget session.
- **What is Question Hour?** Question Hour is the first hour of a sitting session of India's Lok Sabha devoted to questions that Members of Parliament raise about any aspect of administrative activity. The concerned Minister is obliged to answer to the Parliament, either orally or in writing, depending on the type of question raised.
- **Sessions of the Parliament?** In India the Parliament conducts three sessions a year - **Budget Session** (January/February to May), **Monsoon Session** (July to August/September), **Winter Session** (November to December).

#### 10. [SC clears centre's plan to build a three times bigger Parliament](#)

- The Supreme Court, in a majority judgment, gave its go-ahead to the multi-crore **Central Vista redevelopment project**, which proposes to build a new Parliament three times bigger than the existing 93-year-old heritage building.
- The majority opinion said the project did not involve any “radical” change in land use. It dismissed notions that the project was “sui generis” and deserved a “**heightened judicial review**”. It stated that, It is not the court’s concern to enquire into the priorities of an elected government. Judicial review is never meant to venture into the mind of the government and thereby examine validity of a decision.
- The majority judgment said there was absolutely no legal basis to “heighten” the judicial review by applying a yardstick beyond the statutory scheme, especially when the government itself had accorded no special status to the project.
- Petitioners in the case and academics expressed their dismay at the Supreme Court giving its nod. Rajiv Suri, one of the petitioners, said that the court’s verdict was a long, rambling, drab and dreary judgment containing no landmarks or path breaking interpretations on law, a massive redevelopment exercise is being done without detailed discussion in Parliament from the environment point of view.

#### 11. [Ordinance on cow slaughter promulgated](#)

- The Karnataka government promulgated the *Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Ordinance, 2020*, to ban slaughter of cows. It also bans slaughter of bulls of all ages and buffaloes aged below 13. The new law will not stop slaughter of buffaloes aged above 13. Hence, slaughterhouses could continue to operate, and there will not be a blanket ban on beef.

#### 12. [Union budget to be presented on February 1st](#)

- The Budget session of Parliament is expected to begin on January 29, with the Budget being presented as per schedule on February 1. As is the norm, the Budget session will be conducted in two phases. The first, beginning on January 29, will conclude on February 15. The second phase will run from March 8 to April 8, sources said. The decision was taken by the **Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs or CCPA**.

#### 13. [SC to study anti-conversion laws of Uttarakhand and UP](#)

- The Supreme Court agreed to examine the constitutional validity of laws enacted by States, such as Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. A Bench led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, however, did not stay the implementation of the ***Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020*** and the ***Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2018***, despite fervent pleas by petitioners. The petitioners said the laws were against public policy and society at large.

#### **14. Using God's name to sell articles is illegal**

- The Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court has declared that advertisement of any article using the name of any God and claiming that it has supernatural qualities, is “illegal” and falls under the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act.
- A division bench of Justices T.V. Nalawade and M.G. Sewlikar was hearing a petition filed by Rajendra Ambhore, a teacher, seeking a direction and injunction to prevent advertisements on television channels that promote the sale of articles like Hanuman Chalisa Yantra.

#### **15. Punishing someone for falling in love is a crime**

- It is a crime to punish a person for falling in love and yearning to have a life in each other’s company, the Supreme Court has said. It was among the worst forms of crime. The Chief Justice, leading a three-judge Bench, was hearing the case for granting bail to 11 former Khap panchayat members who ordered the murder of a Dalit boy, his cousin and a girl.

#### **16. Committee to look into Ladakh issues**

- A committee would be constituted under **Minister of State for Home G. Kishan Reddy** to find an appropriate solution to the issues related to language, culture and conservation of land in the Union Territory of Ladakh. The committee would comprise members of the delegation that met the Home Minister, elected members from Ladakh, members of the LAHDC and ex-officio members representing the Government of India and the Ladakh administration.
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## National News/ Interventions



### Daily snippets

#### 1. Acclimatising to climate risks

- A recent report by the **Council on Energy, Environment and Water** found that 75% of districts in India, home to over half the population, were **vulnerable to extreme climate risks**.
- Further, between 1990 and 2019, India incurred losses exceeding \$100 billion. Also, the **intensity of floods increased** eightfold and that of associated events such as **landslides and heavy rainfall increased** by over 20 times since 1970. Drought affected districts have increased by an yearly average of 13 times over the last two decades. The frequency of cyclones has also doubled. Over 40% of Indian districts now show a swapping trend: flood prone areas are becoming drought prone, and vice versa.
- **What should India do in 2021 to enhance its resilience and adaptive capacity against extreme climate events?**
- First, India should create an **Environment and Health Derisking Mission** to increase emergency preparedness, secure critical resources and build resilient infrastructure and governance systems to counter the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme climate events.
- Second, India needs a comprehensive **Climate Risk Atlas** to present a risk informed decision making toolkit for policymakers at the national, State, and district level.
- Third, to **finance climate action** at scale, risk financing instruments and risk retention and identification tools should be supplemented by contingency and adaptation funds such as the **Green Climate Fund**.
- Finally, as the permanent chair of the recently formed **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure**, India should play a pivotal role in attracting private investments into **climate proofing of infrastructure**.

#### 2. Pakistan targeting civilians and religious places, says Army

- The Army on Thursday said the Pakistani Army, manning the Line of Control (LoC), has "*shifted its focus*" and started "*targeting civil habitation and even mosques to inflict civil casualties*" in J&K. Meanwhile, one CRPF jawan was injured and a civilian was killed in attacks in Kashmir on Thursday

#### 3. Nationwide vaccine dry run tomorrow

- A dry run will be conducted by all the State governments and Union Territory administrations on January 2 (Saturday) with the **objective of preparing for the rollout of COVID19 vaccine across the country**, the Union Health Ministry said on Thursday.
- It added that the States/UTs had been asked to ensure physical verification of all proposed sites for adequacy of space, logistical arrangements, Internet connectivity, electricity and safety. They have also been asked to prepare at least three model session sites in each State (at State capital) for demonstration.

#### 4. Colonel Narinder Kumar passes away at 87

- Colonel Narinder 'Bull' Kumar (Retd.), instrumental in the **Army launching Operation Meghdoot** and securing the dominating heights of **Siachen Glacier in 1984**, died. He was 87.
- On April 13, 1984, India launched Operation Meghdoot to **capture the 76.4 km glacier on the Saltoro ridge**. A platoon of the 4 Kumaon led by then Captain Sanjay Kulkarni planted the Indian flag at Bilafond La. Col. Kumar was awarded **Padma Shri** in 1965. He was decorated with **Param Vishisht Seva Medal, Kirti Chakra** and **Ati Vishisht Seva Medal**. He is a recipient of the **MacGregor Medal** awarded to armed forces personnel for military

reconnaissance. The battalion headquarters on the glacier close to an altitude of 16,000 feet is named “**Kumar post**” in his honour.

#### 5. [Expert panel gives the go-ahead for Covishield](#)

- **Covishield**, the vaccine candidate from the Pune-based **Serum Institute of India**, was approved by a **subject expert committee (SEC)** of the **Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI)**. The SEC gives its recommendation to the DCGI which is the approving authority for drugs and vaccines
- **Covishield, which is similar to the ‘Oxford vaccine’** developed by the Oxford University vaccine group and marketed by **AstraZeneca**, was approved by the health regulator in the U.K. under emergency use conditions on Wednesday.
- **Covaxin: Bharat Biotech** has been asked to furnish more data demonstrating the efficacy of its candidate, **Covaxin**.
- **Cause of concern:** In the U.K., the vaccine has been recommended to be given in two doses 4-12 weeks apart. This, even though the vaccine’s performance was evaluated in volunteers who were given doses four weeks apart and there’s still no clarity on how long the protective effect of a single first dose lasts.

#### 6. [‘Housing for poor, middle class a priority’](#)

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone of six **Light House Projects in six cities** as part of the **Global Housing Technology ChallengeIndia (GHTCIndia)** initiative. The aim of the programme is to **build around 1,000 houses** each in Indore (Madhya Pradesh), Rajkot (Gujarat), Chennai (Tamil Nadu), Ranchi ( Jharkhand), Agartala (Tripura) and Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh) over a period of 12 months. Modern construction practices from countries such as France, Germany and Canada would be adopted.

#### 7. [India urges China to help stranded sailors](#)

- India urged China to provide “urgent” assistance to 39 crew members of the stranded cargo vessels **m.v. Jag Anand** and **m.v. Anastasia**. Both the **ships have been stuck for months near the Jingtang and Caofeidian ports**.
- The statement came soon after the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) took *suo motu* cognisance of the condition of the stranded sailors and asked the External Affairs Ministry “to ensure immediate relief” for the crew.
- **Why are sailors stranded in China?:** The exchanges began as m.v. Jag Anand with 23 Indian sailors has been stranded on anchorage near Jingtang port in Hebei province of China since last June 13; m.v. Anastasia with 16 Indian crew has been stuck on anchorage near Caofeidian port since September 20 of last year. The official said the Chinese authorities had conveyed to India that in view of various COVID-19related restrictions imposed by the local authorities, the vessels were not being allowed change of crew.

#### 8. [Free vaccination first for three crore health, frontline workers](#)

- Free COVID-19 vaccination will be provided to three crore healthcare and frontline workers in the first phase of vaccination, **Health Minister Harsh Vardhan** said while taking stock of the nation wide vaccination drive conducted in 286 session sites spread across 125 districts.
- The Minister added that details of 27 crore priority beneficiaries - those above 50 years of age and those below it having comorbidities - is also being finalised.

#### 9. [On the Bhima-Koregaon battle](#)

- The battle of Bhima-Koregaon, one of the last battles in 1818 of the **Third Anglo Maratha War**, saw 500 soldiers of the **Mahar community** fought alongside the English to defeat the numerically superior Army of **Peshwa Bajirao II**. It was Babasaheb Ambedkar’s visit to the site on **January 1, 1927**, that revitalised the memory of the battle for the Dalit community, leading to its commemoration in the form of a victory pillar, besides creating the

discourse of Dalit valour against Peshwai “oppression”. The battle's victory obelisk is called ranstambh. The battle is regarded as part of a **fight against the anti-Dalit policies** being followed during the Peshwa rule.

- The **bicentenary celebrations of the battle in 2018** were marred by clashes which heightened social tensions across Maharashtra. Since then, there have been two investigations into the incident. The Pune rural police have lodged an FIR against right-wing Hindutva leaders **Sambhaji Bhide** ‘Guruji’ and **Milind Ekbote**, for orchestrating the violence.
- The Pune city police and central agencies such as the NIA have conducted crackdowns across the country and arrested a number of lawyers, writers, intellectuals and activists including **advocate Surendra Gadling**, professor **Shoma Sen**, **Gautam Navlakha**, poet **P. Varavara Rao**, Father **Stan Swamy** and **Sudha Bharadwaj** among others for their alleged links with proscribed Maoist outfits and for their roles in the **2017 “Elgaar Parishad”** and the subsequent BhimaKoregaon clashes.

#### **10. India seeks action for attack on Pakistan temple**

- India has expressed “serious concerns” over the demolition of the **Karak Hindu Temple** by a mob in the **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan**, and called upon the Imran Khan government to take “strict action” against those responsible. The temple that was set on fire and demolished by a mob, allegedly instigated by a local cleric and activists of the Jamaat ulema e Islam ( Jul-F), a radical party. This is the second time since 1997 that the Karak temple has been demolished.
- Pakistan’s federal and provincial government, both led by Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf party (PTI), have ordered the arrests of more than 30 people, alleged to be part of the mob of about 1,500 responsible for the attack. The provincial Chief Minister said at a public event that he had issued orders for the reconstruction of the temple.
- Chief of **Pakistan’s Hindu Council Ramesh Vankwani** said that while expressing concerns about human rights issues and minority rights in Pakistan, India, too, should be open to similar concerns raised by Pakistan. He specifically mentioned an attack on a mosque in Madhya Pradesh on Wednesday.
- Despite ongoing tensions over the temple attack and increasing ceasefire violations at the Line of Control, India and Pakistan continued **traditional exchanges of information on New Year’s Day** according to previously signed agreements.

#### **11. Gurgaon to use AI-enabled CCTV network for traffic monitoring**

- It will have artificial intelligence and features such as **traffic signal violation detection, over speeding detection, face recognition and reading of number plates** at 200 odd places, including major intersections. The first phase will see the installation of over 1200 CCTV cameras. The laying of captive optical fibre for the project began in 2018 and the work of camera installation started last year. It connects all the cameras to the Gurgaon Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA’s) Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC), monitored by the Smart City team.
- These cameras with AI are not only used for surveillance and traffic monitoring, but are also capable of other functions such as crowd detection, detection of unidentified objects and face recognition of criminals. It will make Gurugram one of the first cities in the country to have a **robust surveillance system** in place with the help of CCTV cameras with artificial intelligence. The administration has also used the cameras for COVID-19 related surveillance to ensure social distancing, wearing masks and avoiding gatherings.
- These cameras are a mix of four different types: fixed cameras, red light violation detection (RLVD) cameras, automatic number plate reading (ANPR) cameras and dome cameras. The system automatically encrypts and transfers the data of violation to the centralised server at Traffic Police headquarters and facilitates generation of e-challans. It is capable of 24\*7 operation and can work at night during bad weather.

#### **12. Covaxin gets expert panel nod**

- Indigenous COVID-19 vaccine candidate, Covaxin, developed by Bharat Biotech, was recommended for “restricted use in emergency situations, subject to multiple regulatory conditionalities” by the Subject Expert Committee (SEC) of the **Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation**. The **Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI)** will take a final call on approving the rollout of the vaccine in the country.
- **Covishield**, the vaccine developed by **AstraZeneca and Oxford University** and manufactured by Pune’s Serum Institute of India (SII), was also sent for the DCGI approval. The Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine is vector based which has gone through three significant trial stages with 70% efficacy rate. While the vaccine is safe, however, there are some people who have severe drug allergies (leading to anaphylaxis reaction) and those with compromised immune systems who need to first take approval from their doctors before they take the vaccine shot. With the doctor’s go ahead, these two groups should get the vaccine. No data as of now was available for the vaccination of children and pregnant patients for the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine.

### 13. Malayalam poet lyricist Anil Panachooran passes away

- Poet and lyricist **Anil Panachooran** passed away on Sunday following health complications. He was 55. A lawyer by profession, Panachooran came into the limelight in 2007 with the much appreciated songs in Arabikkadha, including ‘Chora Veena Mannil...’ and ‘Thirike Njan...’. ‘Chora Veena Mannil...’, sung with revolutionary fervour by the poet himself, is played regularly at Left cultural events.
- Even before his arrival in films, he had attained popularity among the poetry aficionados in the State with poems such as ‘**Anaadhan**’, written in the 1990s.

### 14. Government enables I-T department to check on GST frauds

- Tightening the noose around fraudsters rigging the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, the government has roped in the Income Tax Department to tap illicit incomes as part of a crackdown against 7,000 fraud companies. Any income traceable to the use of fake bills and other GST frauds shall be considered concealed income and attract severe penalties. This co-ordinated action had also helped bolster Customs revenues, which crossed the ₹16,000 crore mark in December, 93% higher than the same period a year ago. The government launched the *Vivaad se Vishwas* scheme for resolving tax disputes and has already helped settle cases worth ₹83,000 crore out of an estimated ₹8 lakh crore.
- The **Finance Secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey** mentioned that there is a strong coordination between Income tax, Customs, banks and GST [Goods and Services Tax], and are able to undertake data analytics, using artificial intelligence (AI). “*We are able to trace all dubious transactions from the inception of GST - if someone has issued or availed a fake bill in July 2017, we are able to detect that as well. Even if the bill may have passed through multiple layers of intermediaries, we are in a position to create a network diagram quickly through our AI tools and we are able to identify who all have been partners in the tax fraud*”.

### 15. India approves two COVID-19 vaccines for emergency use

- The **Central Drugs and Standards Committee (CDSCO)** formally approved the COVID-19 vaccines by Bharat Biotech and the Serum Institute of India (SII). This allows the vaccines - Covishield by SII and based on the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, and Covaxin by Bharat Biotech - to be offered to healthcare workers and frontline workers in India. However, neither Covishield nor Covaxin has completed the crucial Phase-3 trial, under which a vaccine candidate is administered to volunteers at multiple locations across the country. Several experts have raised concern over the “*hasty approval*” granted to the COVID19 vaccines despite the lack of adequate efficacy data.
- **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** on Sunday congratulated India and its scientists and innovators minutes after the Drugs Controller General of India granted approval to the vaccines against COVID19 manufactured by the **Serum Institute of India (SII) and Bharat Biotech**.

### 16. On vaccine roll-out

- India should be able to roll out its **COVID-19 vaccination programme** in the “near future” as the preparations are ready and robust, NITI Aayog member (health) V.K. Paul said. He added that at least 12 countries had expressed interest in the indigenous vaccine, Covaxin.
- Stating that all vaccines currently available across the world work even with the mutation of the virus, Dr. Paul said, *“ICMR Bharat Biotech’s Covaxin is a whole virion vaccine approved for restricted use in an emergency by the Drugs Controller General of India and since this vaccine works on the whole of the virus, this is our additional weapon against it.”*
- Experts on the COVAXIN added that the vaccine had the potential to mount a wider immune response against SARSCOV2 as compared to any vaccine currently available and hence offered better protection against its mutation.

#### 17. [Rajasthan village tackling the drug menace](#)

- Reeling under the drug menace for several years, people in a few villages of Jodhpur district’s Bilara block have come together to tackle addiction among the youth. Along with the boycott of persons consuming liquor, tobacco and narcotics, villagers have decided to impose a penalty on the sellers and buyers of these substances. Villagers in Lamba, situated 19 km from the Block headquarters, announced fines ranging between ₹2,100 and ₹11,000 on buying and selling of heroin, liquor, tobacco and gutka.
- The initiative taken in Lamba has had a ripple effect in the villages of the Bilara block. The mobilisation of villagers in support of de addiction has encouraged them to voluntarily abstain from the consumption of narcotic substances. **The Bilara Panchayat Samiti** is also planning to start a counselling service for helping out youth willing to quit drug addiction.

#### 18. [FSSAI cuts limit for transfat levels in foods](#)

- The **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)** has capped the amount of **trans fatty acids (TFA)** in oils and fats to 3% for 2021 and 2% by 2022 from the current permissible limit of 5% through an amendment to the Food Safety and Standards (Prohibition and Restriction on Sales) Regulations. The revised regulation applies to edible refined oils, vanaspati (partially hydrogenated oils), margarine, bakery shortenings and other mediums of cooking such as vegetable fat spreads and mixed fat spreads.
- What are transfats? Transfats are associated with an increased risk of heart attacks and death from coronary heart disease. According to the World Health Organization, **approximately 5.4 lakh deaths** take place each year globally because of the intake of industrially produced trans fatty acids. The WHO has also called for the global elimination of transfats by 2023.
- While the regulation comes into effect immediately, industry players were made to take a pledge back in 2018 that they would comply with the **WHO’s call for action to reduce TFA by 3% by 2021** allowing them three years to comply with the latest norm.

#### 19. [Ayodhya temple work to begin by January-end](#)

- Work on the foundation for the **Ram Mandir in Ayodhya** will start by January end, said the trust entrusted with its construction. It acknowledged that the study of the soil was still not complete even after seven months. The trust will start a mass contact and contribution campaign for the temple work from Makar Sankranti.

#### 20. [122 Bangladesh soldiers to march in R-Day parade](#)

- A 122 member tri-service contingent of the **Bangladesh armed forces will participate in the Republic Day parade**. This coincides with the **50th anniversary celebrations of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh**. Indian Air Force planes will ferry the contingent to and from Bangladesh. The contingent will be carrying its own ceremonial rifles and the personnel will be in their combat dress during the march past.

#### 21. [Adverse events must be reported fortnightly](#)

- Both **Bharat Biotech** and the **Serum Institute of India (SII)**, which have received approval from the Drugs Controller General of India for manufacturing and distributing their COVID19 vaccines, are expected to submit reports every 15 days on adverse events, if any, among those vaccinated for two months. After this, they would have to submit such reports once a month.
- The vaccines developed by both companies have not gone through all the required tests, particularly the trials that determine whether the vaccines are effective in Indians. Both companies have been given **approvals for “restricted emergency use”**, though there are further caveats to **Covaxin, the Bharat Biotech product**, which restrict it to be provided only in a *“clinical trial mode”*.
- **The SII’s vaccine, Covishield**, is based on a chimpanzee adenovirus and developed at Oxford University. U.K. trials showed a 70.4% efficacy with wide variation across subgroups.
- **Covaxin** is a whole inactivated virus, the oldest technology in vaccine development, and current scientific reports suggest that it produced a strong immune response in animals but no data yet suggested its efficacy. According to the permission notices made public on Monday, Covaxin has to finish its Phase 1, 2 and 3 trials, and submit updated safety, immunogenicity and efficacy data.

## 22. [India to aim at ‘reformed multilateralism](#)

- India was approaching its **two year term on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** with *“a strong commitment to reformed multilateralism”*, **India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, T.S. Tirumurti** said on Monday. The Ambassador was speaking at a ceremony to install the national flags of countries who will be UNSC members for 2021-22.

## 23. [Odisha government to track social media to check pangolin poaching](#)

- The Odisha Forest department has stressed the need for **stricter monitoring of social media platforms** to check pangolin poaching and trading. Trafficking of live pangolin and its scales is a highly lucrative business for organised mafia, who exploit poor and vulnerable forest dwelling communities for their criminal interests. This was pushing the endangered species into extinction and simultaneously placing these communities at high risk. Owing to the cyber revolution, a sizeable chunk of wildlife trade started taking place through social media. [What are Pangolins?](#)

## 24. [Delhi's tableau featuring new Chandni Chowk approved by centre](#)

- The city’s Republic Day tableau - showcasing the **Chandni Chowk Redevelopment Project** – has been accorded approval by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Not only will it be the only other “live” tableau apart from the Ram Temple themed Uttar Pradesh float, Delhi’s tableau, featuring mini contingents of four cyclists each riding along on either side of it in a symbolic bid to promote it as a means of commuting in a megacity, according to government sources, will possibly be the first time bicycles will run on Raj path as part of a State float.
- Chandni Chowk Redevelopment Project - undertaken at a cost of ₹90 crore and part of a larger redevelopment plan for the Walled City of Shahjahanabad which is on the brink of being inaugurated - showcasing a Delhi government accomplishment after three years. Last year Delhi's tableau featured Mahatma Gandhi’s 720 day stay in the city between 1915 and 1948.

## 25. [U.K. PM Boris Johnson calls off India visit](#)

- **British Prime Minister Boris Johnson** has cancelled his visit to India in the last week of January, when he was to be the chief guest at the Republic Day parade. The U.K. Foreign Office said the **decision was taken in view of the escalation in the COVID19 situation**.

## 26. [Changing contours of IndiaU.K. ties](#)

- **Republic Day Chief Guests under Modi Govt. :** American President Donald Trump was Mr. Modi’s first choice for January 2019 but the honour eventually fell to Mr. Trump’s alter ego, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. Mr.

Modi's selections are revealing: U.S. President **Barack Obama in 2015**, French President **Francois Hollande in 2016**, the Crown Prince of the **United Arab Emirates in 2017**, the **ASEAN leaders in 2018**, South African President **Cyril Ramaphosa in 2019**, Mr. **Bolsonaro in 2020**, and Mr. **Johnson for 2021**.

- **India-U.K. links are substantial** : One and a half million persons of Indian origin reside in Britain, 15 of them are Members of Parliament, three in Cabinet and two holding high office as Finance and Home Ministers. Before COVID-19, there were half a million tourists from India to Britain annually and twice that figure in the reverse direction. Around 30,000 Indians study in Britain despite restrictive opportunities for post graduation employment. Britain is among the top investors in India and India is the **second biggest investor** and a major job creator in Britain. India has a credit balance in a total trade of \$16 billion, but the level is below India's trade with Switzerland, Germany or Belgium.
- **India's advantages** : India has a **shared past with Britain** and needs to chart a different shared future, now that Britain has left the European Union (EU). One joint enterprise will be as members of the UN Security Council where Britain has permanent status and India holds a non-permanent seat this year and next. And this year, Mr. Johnson will be hosting India as an invitee to the G7, and the UN Climate Change Conference.
- **Britain's advantages**: From Britain's point of view, Mr. Modi's invitation to its Prime Minister was fortuitous because Brexit necessitates that every effort be made to **seek commercial advantage in Asian countries** with high growth rates. India has been fruitlessly negotiating a **trade agreement with the EU since 2007**, during which Britain was considered the main dealbreaker.

#### 27. **Two-day Asian Waterbird Census off to a flying start**

- The two day **Asian Waterbird Census 2020** commenced in Andhra Pradesh on Tuesday under the aegis of experts from the **Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS)**, covering at least two dozen sites, including Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary, Kolleru Lake and Krishna Sanctuary

#### 28. **U.S., India cooperated on LAC action, says Juster**

- The U.S. has cooperated with India to counter "*aggressive*" Chinese actions at the Line of Actual Control, its Ambassador, Kenneth Juster, confirmed, saying it was for the Indian government to give details of the nature of military cooperation during the **on-going eight month standoff between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army**.
- While this is the first time an official is confirming the cooperation over the standoff, it was reported earlier that over the past few months, the U.S. has assisted India with geospatial data, satellite maps and emergency procurement of extreme weather clothing. Officially, India has maintained that it is resolving the situation with China "*bilaterally and diplomatically*".

#### 29. **States on alert on fear of bird flu**

- Several States sounded an alert to **contain avian influenza, or H5N8**, while Kerala began culling thousands of ducks. Nearly 2,000 migratory birds were found dead in Himachal Pradesh, while Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh reported deaths of several hundred birds. In Haryana, the "*unusual*" deaths of four lakh poultry birds have been reported in the past 10 days. Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, both neighbouring Kerala, put their Animal Husbandry and Forest Departments on alert as fears of the bird flu spreading grew.

#### 30. **Prime Minister inaugurates Kochi-Mangalore LNG pipeline**

- Inaugurating the 450km Kochi-Koottanad-Mangalore LNG (liquefied natural gas) pipeline, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that as part of efforts to make India a natural gas based economy, 10,000 more **CNG (compressed natural gas) stations** would be opened and several lakh PNG (piped natural gas) household connections given in the coming days. The facility was deemed part of the "**one nation, one gas grid**" policy. The plan was to increase the share of natural gas in the energy sector from the present **6% to 15% by 2030**.

- Impetus is on diversification of energy requirements. Focus was being given on increasing production of ethanol to increase its content in petrol to **20% from the present 5%**. The **world's largest hybrid energy plant** (wind and solar) was coming up in Gujarat. The electric mobility sector too was being encouraged. Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas **Dharmendra Pradhan**, said the new pipeline would have international importance, wherein the **carbon footprint would get substantially reduced**.

### 31. Government launches hackathon for toys

- The Centre launched a hackathon for students, teachers and start ups to design and develop toys and games *“based on Indian culture and ethos, local folklore and heroes, and Indian value systems.”* The goal of the **“toycathon”** is to promote India as a global toy manufacturing hub. The toy market in India is worth \$1 billion, 80% toys are imported. The **Toycathon** has nine themes, including fitness and sport and rediscovering traditional Indian toys. The hackathon is an initiative of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Child Development Ministry of Textile, Ministry of Commerce and Industries, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and All India Council for Technical Education.

### 32. Boosting India with maritime domain awareness

- **Expansion of India's Maritime Surveillance** : Of late, the Indian Navy has been on a drive to improve domain awareness in the Indian Ocean. The Navy is seeking to expand India's surveillance footprint by **setting up radar stations in the Maldives, Myanmar and Bangladesh**; Mauritius, the Seychelles and Sri Lanka have already integrated into the wider coastal radar chain network. The Indian Navy's efforts seem **focused primarily on monitoring Chinese activity** in the Eastern Indian Ocean, particularly in the seas around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Since June 2020, when the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army clashed in Galwan in northern Ladakh, Indian maritime planners have been wary of the **possibility of a greater Chinese presence in the eastern littorals**. In recent months, India's P-8I aircraft have scoured the nearseas for People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines, and Indian naval ships have patrolled the Andaman Seas and eastern chokepoints to deter any maritime adventurism by Beijing.
- **Increased Synergy with Neighbours** : But maritime domain awareness is also generating cooperative synergies in the neighbourhood. There are reports that seven Indian Ocean countries - Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles - will soon post **Liaison Officers at the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre Indian Ocean Region in Gurugram**. France already has an officer at the IFC, and four other Indo-Pacific navies - **Australia, Japan, the U.K and the U.S.** - have also agreed to position officers at the centre, fast emerging as the most prominent information hub in the Eastern Indian Ocean.
- New Delhi is also upping its engagement in the Western Indian Ocean by positioning a **Liaison Officer at the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar**. Established under the auspices of the Indian Ocean Commission that India joined recently as an 'observer', the **RMIFC is a key centre of maritime information in the Western Indian Ocean**. India has also posted an officer at the **European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) in Abu Dhabi** to assist in the **monitoring of maritime activity in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz**.
- France has been instrumental in securing 'observer' status for India at the Indian Ocean Commission, and is pushing for greater Indian participation in security initiatives in the Western Indian Ocean.
- India's military satellite (GSAT-7A) may soon facilitate a real time sharing of maritime information with partners. These endeavours are a manifestation of **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)**, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's philosophical mantra that advances the idea of India as a *'security provider'* and *'preferred partner'* in the Indo-Pacific region.

### 33. Sri Lanka will gain from meeting Tamil concerns'

- It is in *“Sri Lanka's own interest”* that the expectations of the Tamil people for equality, justice, peace and dignity within a united Sri Lanka are fulfilled, **External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar** said.

- Consistent with New Delhi's messaging on **Sri Lanka's Tamil question** since the Rajapaksas came to power, Mr. Jaishankar's emphasis on Tamil concerns appeared as a response to growing calls in Sri Lanka, including from senior Ministers in the ruling Rajapaksa administration and members of the influential Buddhist clergy, for the **abolition of the provincial council system and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution**.
- Their campaign, while the government mulls holding elections to its nine provincial councils, effectively threatens the only legislative guarantee of a measure of power devolution, that followed the **Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987**.
- **The Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord** : It was an accord signed in **Colombo on 29 July 1987**, between **Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayewardene**. The accord was expected to resolve the Sri Lankan Civil War by enabling the **thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka** and the Provincial Councils Act of 1987. Under the terms of the agreement, Colombo agreed to a devolution of power to the provinces, the Sri Lankan troops were to be withdrawn to their barracks in the north and the Tamil rebels were to surrender their arms.

#### 34. [Science policy to boost journal access](#)

- The proposed **Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (STIP)** aims to establish a system whereby all researchers in India can access research published in top international journals at no cost. The Science Ministry has not yet drawn up a plan of execution as the STI policy is still in draft mode. The policy sets a target for doubling the number of full time equivalent researchers, **gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD)** and private sector contribution to the GERD every five years.
- The policy has been drafted through a "four track" process of consultation and endeavours to implement major changes through short, medium and long term mission mode projects. The policy is to identify and address the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian STI (Science, Technology, Innovation) ecosystem to catalyse the socioeconomic development of the country.

#### 35. [Theme-based monitoring for Rajasthan forestry works](#)

- A new theme based monitoring mechanism has been developed by the Forest department in Rajasthan to enable the field officers to ensure progress and timely completion of works for protection of flora and fauna. The field officers in the districts would visit the sites of forestry works, including those of compensatory afforestation, and shoot video footages of three minutes each. These video clippings will be uploaded on the **theme based monitoring groups**.

#### 36. [Foundation stone laid for 'New Anubhava Mantapa'](#)

- Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa laid the foundation stone for the 'New Anubhava Mantapa' in Basavakalyan, the place where 12th century **poet philosopher Basaveshwara** lived for most of his life.
- The New Anubhava Mantapa, as envisaged now, will be a six-floor structure in the midst of the 7.5 acre plot and represent various principles of Basaveshwara's philosophy. It will showcase the **12th Century Anubhava Mantapa** (often referred to as the "**first Parliament of the world**") established by him in Basavakalyan, where philosophers and social reformers held debates. The building will adopt the **Kalyana Chalukya style of architecture**.
- **Who was Basaveshwara?** Basavanna was an Indian 12th-century statesman, philosopher, poet, Lingayat saint in the Shiva-focused Bhakti movement, and Hindu Shaivite social reformer during the reign of the Kalyani Chalukya/Kalachuri dynasty. Basavanna reached his peak of influence during the rule of King Bijjala II in Karnataka.

#### 37. [On the avian-flu outbreak](#)

- Avian flu has been reported at 12 epicentres in four States - Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala. Avian influenza (AI) viruses have been circulating worldwide for centuries with four known major outbreaks recorded in the last century. India notified the first outbreak of avian influenza in 2006.

- In India, the disease spreads mainly from migratory birds coming into the country during the winter months. However, secondary spread by human handling cannot be ruled out. Government had formulated the **2015 National Avian Influenza Plan**.



## International NEWS/Events/ Personalities

### Daily snippets

#### 1. **Britain leaves Europe's single market**

- Brexit becomes a reality on Thursday as Britain leaves Europe's customs union and single market, ending nearly half a century of often turbulent ties with its closest neighbours. Brexit has dominated British politics since the **country's narrow vote to leave the bloc in June 2016**, opening deep political and social wounds which remain raw.
- **Legally, Britain left the EU on January 31**, but it has been in a transition period during fractious talks to secure a free trade agreement with Brussels, which was finally clinched on Christmas Eve.
- **Post-Brexit scenario:** Once the transition ends, EU rules will no longer apply, with the immediate consequence being an end to the free movement of more than 500 million people between Britain and the 27 EU states. Customs border checks will be back for the first time in decades, and despite the free trade deal, queues and disruption from additional paperwork are expected.
- Britain, a financial and diplomatic big hitter plus a major NATO power, is the **first member state to leave the EU**, which was set up to **forge unity after the horrors of World War II**. The EU has lost **66 million people** and an economy worth **\$2.85 trillion**, but Brexit, with its appeal to nationalist populism, also triggered fears that other disgruntled members could follow suit.

#### 2. **Hong Kong court revokes tycoon's bail**

- Hong Kong's highest court revoked **media tycoon Jimmy Lai's** bail after prosecutors succeeded in asking the judges to send him back to detention. Mr. Lai is among a string of **pro-democracy supporters arrested by Hong Kong police** in recent months.

#### 3. **More U.S. tariffs on French, German goods**

- The United States announced that it will impose additional tariffs on French and German products as part of a long running **dispute over subsidies for aircraft manufacturers Airbus and Boeing**.
- The move was in retaliation to tariffs imposed by the European Union which the US considers unfair. The decision is the latest twist in the **16-year trade battle over aircraft subsidies** that turned increasingly sour under

the protectionist instincts of the U.S. President Donald Trump. The EU was authorised this year by the World Trade Organization to levy additional customs duties on American products.

#### 4. [Syria war killed 6,800 in 2020 in lowest annual toll](#)

- The Syrian conflict claimed the lives of at least 6,800 people in 2020, the lowest annual death toll since it began nearly a decade ago. According to figures compiled by the **Syrian Observatory for Human Rights**, more than **10,000 people were killed in the conflict in 2019**. The deadliest year was **2014, when more than 76,000 people died**.
- The **fighting, which erupted in 2011** after the brutal repression of anti government protests, largely abated in 2020 as a ceasefire was held in northwestern Syria and attention turned to containing the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost **10 years of war have devastated Syria's infrastructure**, crippled the economy and led to the displacement of more than half of its pre-war population.

#### 5. [Iran honours 'martyr' Soleimani](#)

- Iran this week honours military commander **Qasem Soleimani**, who was **killed a year ago by the United States**, an arch enemy. He is revered as a heroic warrior across the Islamic republic.
- Soleimani's killing at the age of 62 sharply **heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran**, whose decades old animosity had deepened when Mr. Trump withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal and launched a "maximum pressure" campaign to isolate Iran.
- In the aftermath of retaliation by Iran on Suleimani's killing, **Iran had accidentally shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane** near Tehran, claiming the lives of all 176 aboard. Soleimani headed the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which directly answers to **Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**.

#### 6. [Petition against Sindh govt.'s refusal to free Pearl's killers](#)

- The lawyers for British-born al-Qaeda leader **Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh** and his three aides have filed an appeal **petition in a Pakistani court against the refusal of the authorities to release them from jails** despite their convictions in the kidnapping and murder of American journalist **Daniel Pearl** being set aside last month.
- In a surprise move, a two-judge bench of the Sindh High Court on December 24 directed security agencies **not to keep Sheikh and other accused under "any sort of detention"** and declared all notifications of the Sindh government related to their detention "null and void". However, the provincial and **jail authorities have not released them as yet**.
- Early this week, the U.S. said it is ready to take custody of Sheikh, asserting that Washington will not allow him to evade justice. Sheikh, along with **Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar**, 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**.

#### 7. [Tsai hails Taiwan's virus wins, notes China threats](#)

- **Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen** hailed the island's progress in containing the coronavirus pandemic and growing the economy while facing military threats from China. In her annual New Year's Day address, Ms. Tsai said Taiwan had conquered the virus through "*professionalism, trusting one another and unifying as a society,*" without lockdowns or serious disruptions to business and education. **Taiwan has been applauded for its sustained efforts to contain COVID-19**, with just seven deaths and fewer than 800 cases.

#### 8. [U.K. in 'eye of storm' as cases surge](#)

- British hospitals around the country face a perilous situation in January, medical workers warned amid **surging coronavirus infections blamed on a new virus variant**. Concerns are mounting about the ability of the already stretched National Health Service to cope with the anticipated increase in people seeking treatment for COVID-19 infections.
- **New infections have more than doubled in recent weeks** after a **new variant that is said to be around 70% more contagious** was found to be behind a big spike in cases around London and the southeast of England. Around **1 million people have received the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine**, with a small minority also getting the second dose as planned after 21 days.

#### 9. [LeT leader held ahead of FATF meet](#)

- Nearly five years after he was released on bail in the **26/11 Mumbai attacks case**, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operations commander **Zaki-ur-Rahman Lakhvi** was arrested in Pakistan by its Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) on charges of using terror funds. The timing of the arrest is significant as it comes ahead of meetings of the global watchdog **Financial Action Task Force (FATF)** and its Asia Pacific Joint Group (APJG) in the next few weeks, which will consider Pakistan's "**greylist**" status, meant for countries "under increased monitoring"
- Indian officials questioned the seriousness of the action, saying it had become routine for Pakistan to showcase **arrests of key terrorist figures just before FATF meetings**. Pakistan has been retained on the greylist, but faces blacklisting if it fails to **complete a 27-point action plan** to curb terror financing and money laundering.
- At least **146 U.N. banned terrorists are Pakistani citizens**, but India has been closely pursuing the prosecution of **Hafiz Saeed, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi** and Jaish-e-Mohammad chief **Masood Azhar** through international channels like FATF for their role in continuing terror attacks.

#### 10. [China warns of action against US delisting of its Telecom companies](#)

- China will take 'necessary measures' to safeguard the interests of its companies after the New York Stock Exchange began delisting three Chinese telecom firms that Washington says have military ties. The NYSE said on Thursday that it would delist **China Mobile, China Unicom and China Telecom**.
- "This kind of abuse of national security and state power to suppress Chinese firms does not comply with market rules, It not only harms the legal rights of Chinese [firms] but also damages the interests of investors in other countries, including the United States," the Chinese Ministry of Commerce said in a statement. Relations between the two biggest economies have come under increasing strain amid a series of disputes over issues such as **trade and human rights**. The U.S. Commerce Department added dozens of Chinese firms to a trade blacklist in December, accusing Beijing of using its firms to harness civilian technology for military purposes.

#### 11. [Kazakhstan President abolishes death penalty](#)

- Kazakhstan abolished the death penalty, making permanent a nearly two-decade freeze on capital punishment in the authoritarian Central Asian country, a notice on the presidential website said. The notice said **President KassymJomart Tokayev** had signed off on parliamentary ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**.

#### 12. [Iran plans to enrich uranium to up to 20% purity, says IAEA](#)

- Iran has informed the **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)** that it intends to produce uranium enriched to up to 20% purity, well **beyond the threshold set by the 2015 Vienna accord**, the UN nuclear watchdog said on Friday.
- Tehran was enriching uranium to levels greater than the limit provided for in the Vienna agreement (3.67%) but not exceeding the 4.5% threshold, and still complied with the Agency's very strict inspection regime. But there has been **turmoil since the assassination in late November of Iranian nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh**. In

the aftermath of the attack, blamed on Israel, hardliners in Tehran pledged a response and Parliament passed a controversial law calling for the production and storage of “at least 120 kg per year of 20% enriched uranium” and to “put an end” to the IAEA inspections intended to check that the country is not developing an atomic bomb.

### 13. [We hope to join you again, Scottish leader tells EU](#)

- **Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon** told the European Union “we hope to join you again soon” as an independent nation following Britain’s full departure from the bloc. A comfortable **majority of Scots voted to remain in the European Union** during the **2016 Brexit referendum**, giving fresh impetus to the movement pushing for Scotland to leave the United Kingdom.
- After losing the 2014 independence vote, **Scottish National Party (SNP)** leader Sturgeon is spearheading the push for another referendum and hopes to rejoin the EU should she fulfill her dream. Recent polls have shown **consistent support for independence**, with the coronavirus outbreak further driving a wedge between the devolved governments and London.
- But readmission to the EU would not be a formality, with Scotland running a heavy annual fiscal deficit. Ms. Sturgeon would also have to rely on **British Prime Minister Boris Johnson** agreeing to a referendum in the first place. He has ruled out such a vote, but the SNP will likely claim a mandate and heap pressure on Johnson should the party perform well in upcoming local elections.

### 14. [China amends defence law to boost war preparedness](#)

- **China’s President Xi Jinping** has signed an order that has amended **China’s National Defence Law**, giving the **Central Military Commission (CMC)**, which he heads, greater power in mobilising resources to protect a new and broader definition of what constitutes the national interest.
- The amendment broadened the scope of key security fields beyond land borders, maritime and air defence, to include outer space and electromagnetic networks.
- The amendments, experts said, were also aimed at increasing the control exercised by the CMC and transferring some decision making previously exercised by the State Council, or Cabinet, that runs the government, to the CMC. The broader goal is to **speed up the modernisation plans for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)**.
- After **Mr. Xi assumed the role of General Secretary of the Communist Party in 2012** and as President the following year, a number of measures have restructured the Party State apparatus, handing back greater political control to Party bodies that previously had left decision making to the government machinery. In 2016, Mr. Xi pushed sweeping reforms of the PLA and brought its various departments under more direct control of the CMC, which he heads. Seven military regions were reorganised into five integrated theater commands. **The Western Theater Command, the largest, is responsible for the border with India.**
- The change comes amid a push for closer civil military fusion, with a **target to make the PLA a “world class” military, or on par with the United States military, by 2049**, when the People’s Republic of China turns 100.

### 15. [U.K. set for tougher virus restrictions](#)

- **British Prime Minister Boris Johnson** said he was “reconciled” to the prospect of **tougher restrictions to combat spiralling coronavirus cases**, as a row flared over whether schools should reopen. Britain recorded 57,725 new cases on Saturday, its highest total of the entire pandemic.
- **Opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer** urged the Prime Minister to immediately **impose national lockdown measures**. Much of **Britain is already under regional lockdown**, although primary schools are set to reopen in most of the country when the Christmas holiday ends on Monday.

#### 16. 'Scotland must wait a generation for new vote'

- Another Scottish independence referendum should not take place for a generation, **British Prime Minister Boris Johnson** said on Sunday, as **Scotland's leader renewed calls for a fresh vote in the wake of Brexit**. Scotland voted to remain part of the United Kingdom in 2014.
- **Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon** at the time called it a once in a generation vote, but now argues that Britain's departure from the European Union, which a majority of Scots opposed, has changed the game. Recent polls have shown consistent support for independence.

#### 17. Israel dismisses Iran charge it seeks to trick U.S. into war

- Israel dismissed as "*nonsense*" an allegation by the Iranian Foreign Minister that **Israel was trying to trick the United States into waging war on Iran**.
- It was Israel that needed to be on alert for possible Iranian strikes on the one-year anniversary on Sunday of the assassination of Tehran's top general, **Qassem Soleimani**, in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said on Kan public radio.
- Washington blames Iran backed militia for regular rocket attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq, including near the U.S. Embassy. No known Iran backed groups have claimed responsibility.

#### 18. Assange's extradition to U.S. rejected by U.K. court

- A British judge blocked the extradition of **WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange** to the United States to face espionage charges, finding that he was at serious risk of suicide.
- The ruling follows more than a decade of legal controversies. Mr. Assange and his lawyers have long argued that the protracted case was politically motivated. However, the U.S. government gave notice that it will challenge the decision, and has two weeks to appeal. Mr. Assange was remanded in custody until a bail hearing on Wednesday.

#### 19. Iran steps up uranium enrichment, seizes tanker

- **Iran on Monday began enriching uranium up to 20%** at an underground facility and **seized a South Korean flagged oil tanker in the crucial Strait of Hormuz**, further escalating tensions in West Asia between Tehran and the West.
- The dual incidents come amid **heightened tensions between Iran and the U.S.** in the waning days of President Donald Trump's term in office. During Mr. Trump's tenure, the U.S. leader unilaterally withdrew from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers in 2018 and set off months of tense episodes that increasingly strained relations between the countries.
- Iran's decision to begin enriching to 20% purity a decade ago nearly triggered an Israeli strike targeting its nuclear facilities, tensions that only abated with the **2015 atomic deal**.
- A resumption of 20% enrichment could see that brinkmanship return as that level of purity is only a technical step away from weapons grade levels of 90%. **Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu** criticised Iran's enrichment decision.

#### 20. Thousands inoculated in Beijing's vaccination drive

- Thousands of people lined up in Beijing on Monday to receive a COVID-19 vaccine as China races to inoculate millions before the Chinese New Year mass travel season in February.
- Health authorities on New Year's Eve granted "*conditional*" approval to a vaccine candidate made by Chinese pharma giant **Sinopharm**, which the company said had a **79% efficacy rate**. China plans to vaccinate millions this winter in the run-up to Lunar New Year in mid-February.

### **21. Taliban to blame for spate of assassinations: U.S. military**

- The **U.S. military blamed the Taliban** for a spate of assassinations of prominent Afghans, the first time Washington has directly accused the insurgent group of the killings.
- The charge comes as the **Afghan government and Taliban are due Tuesday to resume peace talks in Qatar**, as both sides seek an end to the long running conflict. Violence has surged across Afghanistan, with the Taliban and government forces fighting daily across swathes of rural areas.

### **22. Jack Ma 'missing' amid China's clampdown on his businesses**

- **Alibaba founder Jack Ma's** absence from public view in the past two months, including missing the final episode of a TV show on which he was to appear as a judge, has fuelled social media speculation over his whereabouts amid a Chinese regulatory clampdown on his sprawling business empire.
- China's highest profile entrepreneur has not appeared in a public setting since a late October forum in Shanghai, where **he blasted China's regulatory system** in a speech that put him on collision course with officials, resulting in the **suspension of a \$37 billion IPO of Alibaba's Ant Group fintech arm**.
- Chinese regulators have zeroed in on Mr. Ma's businesses since his October speech, including launching an **antitrust probe into Alibaba** and **ordering Ant to separate its lending business from its online payments division**.

### **23. EU rejects criticism on slow vaccine rollout**

- The European Commission defended its coronavirus vaccination strategy amid growing criticism in member States about the **slow rollout of COVID-19 shots** across the region .
- Vaccinations programmes in the 27 nation bloc have gotten off to a slow start and some EU members have been quick to blame the European Union's executive arm for a perceived **failure of delivering the right amount of doses**. *"We have actually signed contracts that would allow member states to get access to 2 billion doses, largely enough to vaccinate the whole of the EU population,"* EU Commission spokesman Eric Mamer said.

### **24. Gulf leaders sign deal to end yearslong dispute**

- Gulf leaders signed a *"solidarity and stability"* deal after leaders of **Saudi Arabia and Qatar** publicly embraced, bringing Doha back into the regional fold after a three year long rift.
- Saudi Arabia had led a coalition of countries in the Gulf and beyond to cut ties and transport links with Qatar in June 2017, charging that it was too close to Iran and backed radical Islamist groups - allegations that Doha denied. Those countries, along with Oman and Kuwait, which have mediated between the two sides, signed a deal in Abu Dhabi, after **Riyadh overnight re-opened its land, sea and air borders to Doha**.

### **25. Georgia goes to polls for key Senate runoffs**

- After an unprecedented campaign that mobilised Donald Trump and his White House successor Joe Biden, Georgians went to the polls on Tuesday for two closely watched U.S. Senate runoffs that could shape the first years of the new Democratic presidency.
- A staggering \$832 million has been spent on the two contests, including spending in the primary and general elections, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. **If Democrats flip both seats, they win back the Senate**, effectively handing Mr. Biden all the levers of political power in Washington and helping him enact his ambitious legislative agenda.

### **26. China court sentences ex-banker to death**

- **Lai Xiaomin**, former chairman of **Hong Kong-listed China Huarong Asset Management Co.** and former Communist Party member, was sentenced to death for soliciting \$260 million in corruption, bribery, and also bigamy.

### 27. [Alibaba to stop online music streaming service amid probe](#)

- China's e-commerce giant, the **Alibaba Group** announced it will close a popular music streaming platform, **Xiami Music**. The announcement comes amid continuing investigations into the group and questions surrounding the future of its founder, **Jack Ma**.
- The troubles for Alibaba started on the eve of the initial public offering (IPO) of its **Ant Group**, its financial arm and the company behind **Alipay, China's biggest digital payments company**. The IPO was expected to be a world record breaking one and was likely to raise \$35 billion. But it was suspended by regulators in early November. This followed a speech by Mr. Ma in Shanghai at a high profile financial forum. The speech was thought to have angered regulators as Mr. Ma took aim at China's financial system and labelled state run banks, whose monopoly has been challenged by his group's entry into online financial services, as "pawn shops".

### 28. [England's lockdown could last into March, says Minister](#)

- England entered a **strict national lockdown** aimed at stemming a **steep rise in COVID-19 cases** that a senior government Minister warned could last into March. **Prime Minister Boris Johnson** announced the measures, including school closures and a ban on leaving home except for exercise and essential shopping.

### 29. [Democrats set to win Senate as Georgia results come in](#)

- Democrats inched closer to taking control of the U.S. Senate as **African American pastor Raphael Warnock** defeated incumbent Republican candidate Kelly Loeffler - a former businesswoman - in one of two run-off elections in Georgia. Mr. Warnock became the **first black Senator elected from the southern State**.
- The other runoff race was too close to call with incumbent David Perdue, a Republican, trailing his challenger, 33-year old Jon Ossoff, a documentary filmmaker, by over 16,000 votes with 98% reporting on Wednesday morning (U.S. time).
- Both run-offs were necessary because no candidate had won more than 50% of the vote in the November elections. If Mr. Ossoff wins the race, the Senate would be split 50-50 between the two parties. Democrats, who already control the House of Representatives, would also have **Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris's** vote in the case of a tie. If Republicans win the second runoff, they will control the Senate 51-49. The high stakes races consequently broke fundraising records and compelled Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden to campaign for the candidates earlier this week.

### 30. [U.S. meddling in standoff: Chinese envoy](#)

- A day after the U.S. Ambassador said India and the U.S. were cooperating against Chinese "*aggressive activity*" at the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)**, China's Ambassador responded accusing the United States of "*meddling*" in the India-China standoff.

### 31. [U.K. court denies bail to Assange](#)

- **WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange** must remain in custody in Britain, while the U.S. appeals a court decision to block his extradition to face charges there for leaking secret documents, a judge in London ruled on Wednesday.
- Judge Vanessa Baraitser, who refused to grant his extradition, told Westminster Magistrates Court that if released there were "*substantial grounds*" to suspect Mr. Assange would "*fail to surrender*" for future appeal hearings.

### 32. Hong Kong acts again to crack down on dissent

- China's crackdown in Hong Kong escalated with police arresting more than 50 opposition figures in their largest operation since a draconian security law was imposed on the financial hub. The sweep is the latest salvo in Beijing's battle to stamp out dissent in the semi autonomous city after millions hit the streets in 2019 with huge pro democracy protests.
- **Hong Kong's security chief John Lee** described the arrests as "*necessary*" and aimed at a group of people who tried to "*sink Hong Kong into an abyss*" and "*overthrow the government*". The EU - which recently agreed a major investment deal with Beijing - called for the "*immediate release*" of those arrested and said it was eyeing possible further sanctions on China over the crackdown.

### 33. China denies entry to WHO experts

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) has said it was "*very disappointed*" that China had not allowed a team of international experts to go ahead with a visit to **study the origins of COVID-19** that was planned for this week. China's decision to not permit the trip appeared to come at the last minute and catch the WHO by surprise, with some of the experts already having left home and in transit when told the visit would not take place.
- **WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** said he was "*very disappointed*" the visit could not go forward. Chinese authorities have suggested they will exert control over how much access international scientists will have and have also controlled research within China on the origins. In recent weeks, the State media in China has increasingly backed a narrative suggesting the virus came to China from elsewhere.

### 34. Control over 'data' behind Alibaba's tussle with authorities

- At the heart of the ongoing tussle between **Jack Ma's Alibaba Group** and regulators in China is the control over "*troves of consumer credit data*" that authorities believe have given the e-commerce giant an unfair advantage over its competitors.
  - On December 24, the **State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR)** said it had launched a probe into Alibaba's "*suspected monopolistic acts*", including "*forcing merchants to choose one platform between two competitors*". This followed the last minute suspension, the previous month, of what was expected to be a record breaking \$35 billion initial public offering (IPO) of the **Ant Group**, which is the group's financial arm and behind **Alipay, China's biggest digital payments company**.
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## Analysis & Opinion

### Opinion : Has the Special Marriage Act failed to protect interfaith couples?

#### 1. Background

- **The Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954**, is seen as a progressive law enacted to help interfaith couples. But with States such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh framing laws that target interfaith marriage, the procedural requirements of the SMA seem to be undermining its original intent by opening the doors to violent moral policing by vigilante groups.
- The **original Special Marriage Act was enacted in 1872**. It was moved by an eminent jurist and Legislative Council member named **Henry Maine**. It was enacted following a **campaign launched in 1860 by Brahma Samaj**, especially **Keshab Chandra Sen**, for simpler marriage ceremonies. It required that two people of different faiths who wish to get married must renounce their respective religions. Its requirement of renouncing one's religion was not compatible with modern ideas of liberalism, individualism and autonomy of the individual, so the 1954 law replaced this 1872 Act.
- 1872 Act allowed the solemnisation of marriages between any two individuals without religious customs, rituals, or ceremonial requirements. Basically, this law was the first step **towards a Uniform Civil Code**. The Act critically creates provisions for the marriage of interfaith couples without religious conversions — a requirement for marriages under personal laws such as the Hindu or the Muslim marriage acts.

#### 2. Issues in focus

- There exist some critical fundamental differences between civil marriages under the Special Marriage Act when compared to marriages under personal laws. These provisions are most problematic for couples who wish to marry against the wishes of their families. Those going for an interfaith marriage, as well as others, could register under the SMA. The effect of the SMA is that once your marriage is registered under it, your religion's personal laws won't apply.
- Marriage under the Special Marriage Act **requires an extra witness** – three, instead of two in the case of marriage registration under personal laws. This extra responsibility might make one think twice before agreeing to be a witness, adding an **extra layer of complexity** in the overall process.
- Despite these issues, couples who choose to use the Special Marriage Act find that there is a **complete lack of transparency around the process**. A lack of this can result in corruption and potential harassment by middlemen, especially in the case of interfaith couples.
- The Uttar Pradesh government cleared a **law against forceful religious conversions**. The law is now being used to target consenting interfaith couples, including those whose parents' agree to the marriage. Madhya Pradesh and Haryana are also contemplating laws on 'Love Jihad' or 'anti-conversion', which use the garb of forced conversions to target inter-faith marriages and require individuals to take special permissions if they wish to convert their religion in order to marry under personal laws.
- Contrary to the premise of the Special Marriage Act that accepts the existence of interfaith relationships, the current 'Love Jihad' laws create scenarios that suggest that every case of inter-faith marriage is actually a case of forced conversion.

### 3. Conclusion

- The complexities of the Special Marriage Act, and the criminalisation of interfaith marriages in the name of forced conversions, couples are being forced to choose **between the devil and the deep blue sea**. This **twin monitoring from the law and the extreme Right** is performing its intended task of discouraging interfaith marriages and maintaining religious 'purity'.
- The discourse around marriage in India ceases to place adult individuals at the center. Familial and societal forces have always played a role in deciding young people's futures. By making the implementation of the Special Marriage Act so complex, the law is further complicating the lives of young people who have decided to choose their own partners.
- Lastly, the attitude of the law is reflected in the name of the act itself — the 'Special' Marriage Act. A marriage that is deemed special because it is seen as an anomaly, something that is out of the ordinary and deserves constant scrutiny.

### Science & Technology : India's vaccination strategy

#### 1. The strong factors

- Under India's '**Expanded Programme on Immunization**', which was initiated in 1978, the country has gathered experience in administering essential vaccines to children and pregnant women. In 1985, the programme was renamed '**Universal Immunisation Programme**', under which about 12 different vaccines are provided through the government health system.
- There is a three-tier system at the district, State and national levels to monitor coverage and adverse events and to ensure that the vaccines adhere to quality norms. Roughly **9 million immunisation sessions** are conducted annually in India, according to UNICEF.
- For the COVID-19 vaccine, India's priority list of beneficiaries includes healthcare workers, municipal workers, police personnel, those over 50 years of age, and younger people with identified comorbidities. This works out to be around 300 million. With at least two vaccines on the EUA list, the whole exercise involves an unprecedented level of digitisation.

#### 2. How the dry-run was carried?

- The dry run was carried out in one or two districts of the States and sessions were organised at district hospitals or medical colleges, community or primary healthcare centres, private health facilities, and at outreach sites in urban and rural areas. It tested all the key steps in the COVID-19 vaccination process in a field environment.
- So far, only two vaccine candidates - **Covishield**, developed by the Serum Institute Pune and based on the AstraZeneca 'Oxford' vaccine, and **Covaxin**, developed by Bharat Biotech and the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) - have been cleared by an expert panel of the **Drug Controller General of India**.

### Science & Technology : Why people with prior infection still need vaccination

#### 1. What science says?

- *"A small minority of those with even symptomatic infection do not end up making high levels of antibodies, and another small minority of such naturally infected people do not make long-lasting antibodies. So, all in all, it is the easiest policy to immunise people without worrying about whether they have been previously infected or not,"* immunologist **Dr. Satyajit Rath**, formerly with the Delhi based National Institute of Immunology, said.

- While highest levels of binding antibodies are seen in people with the most severe disease, asymptomatic infections may result in low antibody levels or even no antibodies being measured in up to 20% of people. Besides binding antibodies, functional antibodies that **block or neutralise the virus** are also found in infected people.
- At the moment, we do not know what really protects against SARS-CoV2 disease, and at what threshold, and for how long. Vaccines are made to **induce a good immune response**, which is expected to be more predictable than the response to infection. The immune response in vaccinated people is being studied as well.
- Both practical considerations as well as lack of precise information on how long immunity lasts after a natural infection necessitates that we do not discriminate against people. Also, immune responses to natural infection can be modified by immune evasion mechanisms of the virus. But vaccine formulations do not include those viral tricks, and therefore, immune responses to the vaccines are more likely to be **uniform and predictable**.
- Although, globally there have been very few cases of reinfection, large scale genome sequencing studies have not been undertaken to categorically say reinfections have been just a handful.

## 2. Pros and Cons

- Like in the case of natural infection, vaccines too can produce responses that can be variable across people. However, variation in vaccine generated immune responses is likely to be less than that in natural infection. Variation will depend on the type of vaccine, host age and underlying comorbidities, which generally can cause a **degree of immunosuppression**.
- A possible reason to avoid vaccinating people with prior infection is the possibility of disease exacerbation, but there is no such evidence in the case of coronavirus. Unlike dengue where this may be an issue, we do not have multiple types of viruses causing COVID-19. Also, if vaccination is to be done selectively, the bigger issue is of testing people for antibodies prior to vaccination. This raises several challenges - increased cost and time, logistics and manpower. Also, since antibodies wane in about six months, ascertaining the infection status in people who were infected early during the pandemic becomes even more challenging.

## Analysis : International Relations : The Brexit deal

### 1. Background

- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson signed the **post-Brexit trade agreement with the European Union (EU)** on Wednesday. The deal, announced on December 24, sets out the terms for **Britain's relationship with the EU** after it left the trading bloc on January 31, 2020.

### 2. Main features of the agreement

- The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which came into force on January 1, 2021, retains the '*zero tariffs*' and quotas trade regime of the past on all imports of goods. It thus averts the potentially catastrophic consequences for Britain of leaving the bloc without any agreement. The current arrangement could limit the potential economic impact from Brexit to a **loss of 4% of the Gross Domestic Product over the medium term**. **Northern Ireland will continue to remain within EU jurisdiction**, avoiding a hardening of its border with the Republic of Ireland. On access for EU fisheries to British seas - a contentious issue - the agreement "*recognises U.K. sovereignty over our fishing waters*".

### 3. What are some new hurdles the U.K. will face?

- An exit from the customs union means the return of customs controls at the U.K. borders and checks on rules of origin to prevent abuse of the zero tariffs regime. The millions of customs declarations U.K. businesses will have

to complete from now onwards are estimated to cost around £7 billion annually, according to HM Revenue & Customs.

#### **4. How does the European Union plan to enforce a level playing field?**

- London has succeeded in breaking free from the jurisdiction of EU law and the European Court of Justice, which U.K. eurosceptics regard as an affront to national sovereignty. British and EU companies will be able to challenge state subsidies awarded to their rivals in relevant national courts if they suspect any violation of common provisions set out in the agreement.

#### **5. How serious could be the impact of the exclusion of services from the accord?**

- As the services sector accounts for about **80% of the U.K.'s economy**, the fallout from leaving it outside the purview of the new accord will be hard. Talks are said to begin this month to formulate a memorandum of understanding as a basis to strengthen mutual cooperation.

#### **6. What does the future hold for relations between Britain and the EU?**

- Ever since the 2016 referendum to quit the EU, European leaders have been unequivocal in their opinion that any future relationship must entail huge costs of exit for the U.K., just as its 47-year membership of the bloc brought vast benefits. Conversely, Britain may discover that striking pragmatic compromises is the way forward to protect sovereignty and national self interest.

### **Analysis : International Relations : CPEC: The corridor of uncertainty**

#### **1. Background**

- On December 25, officials from China and Pakistan met in Urumqi, the capital of China's far western Xinjiang region, for the second meeting of the **Joint Working Group on International Cooperation and Coordination (JWG)** under the **ChinaPakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**. The viability of some of the CPEC's projects, and how they were going to be paid for in a pandemic hit economy, had come under renewed attention in Pakistan.
- Under the **original Long-Term Plan (LTP) for the CPEC (2017-2030)** signed off by both governments, the plan was built around a "1+4" model of the CPEC as the core while prioritising four areas: Gwadar, where China is expanding a port on the Arabian Sea and has ambitious plans for a Free Trade Zone, Energy, Transport Infrastructure and Industrial Cooperation.

#### **2. As CPEC turns five, the picture is mixed**

- The CPEC hasn't been the cure all for Pakistan's economy that was promised. Neither has it been a monumental disaster that brought financial ruin. Signs are that the CPEC will "*fall far short of its transformative intentions*". That, in itself, may not be an entirely bad thing as the shrinkage of the CPEC means that the financial risks - which many other BRI countries face - have been diminished for Pakistan so while the **CPEC will not be the gamechanger for the Pakistani economy** that its supporters once hailed, it is **not a debt trap either**.
- Signs are that the building of the **CPEC is already driving a change in China's positions on issues such as the Kashmir dispute**, with the corridor passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir - a reason why India has opposed. Regardless of the CPEC's limitations, one enduring legacy of the plan that India will have to contend with is **how it has deepened the China-Pakistan ties**, adding heavy economic stakes to an already close military partnership.

### **Analysis : NREGA and Urban Unemployment**

## 1. Background

- The focus on the employment question. Recent data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (<https://bit.ly/3hEnl7Z>), point to a gradual slowdown in employment recovery from the month of July, with the latest numbers pointing to a sharp rise in the national unemployment rate from 6.51% in November to 9.06% for the month of December.

## 2. NREGA structuring

- For labour flocking back to rural India, employment support came in the form of an increased outlay for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA), which witnessed a **243% increase in person workdays**. This increased dependency on NREGA, has seen the **Rural Development Ministry spend nearly 90%** of its increased ₹86,4000 crore allocation by the month of November, while still being unable to fulfil demands for nearly 13% of the 75 million households that demanded work.

## 3. On the gig economy

- The report by Fairwork Foundation (<https://bit.ly/2X5nZSu>) evaluates the well being of gig workers on 11 digital platforms and does so by evaluating them on five metrics of **Fair Pay, Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management** and **Fair Representation**. In its findings however, only two firms (Urban Company and Flipkart) score greater than five (out of a maximum of 10) while seven score only 2 or less. The bottom of rankings are rounded off by India's four largest platform giants, namely, Uber, Ola, Swiggy and Zomato.
- With no urban equivalent to the NREGA on the horizon for the urban unemployed, there must be an increased impetus on evaluating, regulating and supporting new forms of employment that may currently be serving as an informal safety net for those desperately in search of work.
- The current understanding of gig work and workers remains constrained to the limited disclosures made by the platforms themselves. With very few independent studies evaluating the scale and impact of these platforms, most regulators continue to remain in the dark on basic questions surrounding platform labour.

## 4. Issue of regulation

- Owing to the varied nature of gig work - some workers use these platforms as a "side hustle", for others it continues to serve as a primary source of employment, it is further complicated by the risk of a one size fits all regulatory strategy unintentionally hurting the similar, yet distinct, market for highly skilled (and highly paid) freelancers, that continues its rapid growth due to pandemic related fulltime staff layoffs. A more viable strategy then would involve conditional government partnerships with platforms under some of its flagship schemes.
- Initiatives like Swiggy's Street Food Vendors programme under the **PM SVANidhi**, or **PM Street Vendor's Atma Nirbhar Nidhi scheme**, Swiggy has announced the on boarding of 36,000 street food vendors onto the platform under the scheme and ensure that each vendor is registered and certified by the **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India**. Thus, the creation of jobs, alongside the voluntary adoption of quality standards is an example of a mutually beneficial partnership between the state and a platform.

## 5. Urban employment

- Collaborations on urban employment, that require labour platforms to comply with disclosure norms and worker compensation standards to access government support, could be one way for the government to kill two birds with one stone. It would bring down costs significantly for the Urban employment guarantee scheme and would also create an environment where firms would be more likely to cooperate with the state. The challenge

of urban unemployment needs to be tackled. Limited fiscal space and a growing need to fuel the country's consumption base, must push the government to build symbiotic relationships with new partners.

### Analysis : On the validity of law criminalising inter-faith marriages

#### 1. **Background**

- Uttar Pradesh has an ordinance which criminalises inter faith marriages. The U.P. government's focus is firmly on 'protecting' Hindu women from marrying Muslim men. It does this under the pretext of **regulating religious conversions**.

#### 2. **On the Constitutionality**

- Under the Constitution, it is the individual citizen who has and exercises rights and obligations. But these new laws treat religious communities, instead of individual citizens, as basic entities.
- Constitution does address communities when speaking of minority rights and untouchability, it is to only **acknowledge and overcome social discrimination** because that impedes the ability of those citizens to exercise their rights as individuals.
- These laws blatantly violate the Right to Privacy. The level of state interference in a civil union, which is a solemnisation of a relationship between two individuals, breaches the **basic structure of the Constitution**.
- The provisions impede the exercise of an individual's right to choose her faith without seeking state sanction.

#### 3. **Conclusion**

- To fan rumours of 'love jihad' even as the government confirmed in Parliament that there was no evidence of it, is diabolical. But more than that, it is downright dangerous as it seeds mistrust, and **changes fundamental and basic ground rules** that all plural democracies must live by.
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## Science & Technology and Environment

### [Daily snippets](#)

#### 1. [India cultures new coronavirus strain](#)

- **India has successfully cultured the new coronavirus strain**, which was first reported in the U.K., the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said on Saturday. In a tweet, the ICMR claimed that **no country had yet reported successful isolation** and culture of the new variant of SARS-CoV2.
- **Culture** is the process by which cells are grown under controlled conditions, generally outside their natural environment.

#### 2. [Experts suggest ways to reduce hazards posed by birds to flights](#)

- Habitat management of birds, preventing breeding inside airports and discouraging people from dumping waste near airports and airfields can reduce hazards posed by birds to aircraft, a publication by the **Salim Ali Centre For Ornithology** and Natural History (SACON) points out.
- *“Location Specific **habitat management** information is needed to reduce the number of **bird aircraft conflicts**. The habitat management is aimed at reducing the attractiveness of sites for challenging bird species by reducing the availability of food, water, cover and roosting sites,”* the study stated.
- The document states that water flows related to irrigation and **water stagnation of any type should be prevented**. *“Feeding of birds by people close to airports (within a radius of 2 km) should be discouraged and stopped,”* the document states. The experts also recommend that a **database be prepared of all bird species in the 10 km radius** of airports. There are also **species wise recommendations for minimising hazards**.

#### 3. [Woolly rhino from the Ice Age found in Russia](#)

- A well preserved **Ice Age woolly rhino** with many of its internal organs still intact has been recovered from permafrost in Russia's extreme north. It's among the best preserved specimens of the Ice Age animal found to date. Scientists dated the carcass as anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 year old.
  - Recent years have seen major discoveries of mammoths, woolly rhinos, Ice Age foal, and cave lion cubs as the permafrost increasingly melts across vast areas of Siberia because of global warming.
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## Economics and Finance

### Daily snippets

#### 1. Core sector output shrinks 2.6% in November

- Output from **India's eight core sectors** hit a three month low in November, contracting 2.6% in the festive month with coal, fertilizers and electricity the only sectors to record positive growth on a year-on-year basis. The eight core sectors are - **Coal, Natural Gas, Crude Oil, Refinery Products** (such as Petrol and Diesel), Fertilizers, Steel, **Cement** and Electricity.
- In some good NEWS, the Index of Eight core Industries was revised upwards for August and October, based on updated data inputs received by the **Office of Economic Adviser** in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade that compiles the data.
- Electricity output rose for the third month in a row, albeit at a slower pace of 2.2%, while coal production rose year-on-year for the fourth month in a row at 2.9%. Fertilizer production continued to grow, rising 1.6% in November. Fertilizer remains the **only sector to have recorded growth in the first eight months of 2020-21**, growing 3.8% between April and November 2020-21. Refinery products, natural gas and crude oil output continued to decline, falling 4.8%, 9.3% and 4.9%, respectively. In the steel and cement sectors, where output collapsed by 4.4% and 7.1%, respectively, in November, after a fledgling recovery.
- On a cumulative basis from April to November, **the eight sectors' index has declined 11.4%** from the same period a year ago. These sectors account for around 40% of the **Index of Industrial Production or IIP**.
- **What is the Index of Industrial Production?** IIP is an index which shows the growth rates in different industry groups of the economy in a stipulated period of time. The IIP index is computed and published by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) on a monthly basis.

#### 2. ED, RBI to keep track of e-commerce firms

- The Commerce Ministry has forwarded representations of alleged violations by Amazon and Flipkart to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Reserve Bank for 'necessary action,' according to traders' grouping CAIT. The **Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT)** had alleged that the ecommerce players violated FEMA and FDI rules.
- The complaints pertain to alleged **violation of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy** in the deal between Flipkart and Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail and alleged misuse of **FDI policy in manufacturing** for multiband retailing of grocery by leading ecommerce players.

#### 3. India and anti-money laundering systems

- The **Financial Action Task Force (FATF)** had deferred its once a decade evaluation of India's anti money laundering regime scheduled for this year, citing the COVID-19 pandemic. The FATF undertakes peer reviews of each member on an ongoing basis to assess the implementation of its recommendations and provides a detailed analysis of each country's system for preventing criminal abuse of the financial system.

- A major challenge in identifying suspicious transactions was the sheer volume in India's banking system, the load is immense, and so the quality of transaction monitoring suffers. Of late, India's banks have already begun using **artificial intelligence and machine learning tools** to identify transactions that don't follow the usual pattern.

#### 4. **FDI inflows rises 21% to \$35.3 billion in April-Oct**

- Foreign direct investment (FDI) equity inflows into India **grew 21% to \$35.33 billion in the April-October period** of the current financial year, as per official data by the **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)**. Sectors that attracted maximum foreign inflows included computer software and hardware, services, trading, chemicals and automobiles.
- India attracts maximum funds from **Singapore, the U.S., Mauritius, the Netherlands, the U.K., France and Japan**. In the past year, the Centre has eased FDI policy for sectors such as insurance intermediaries and defence.

#### 5. **GST collections touch an all-time high in December**

- Gross revenues from the Goods and Services Tax (GST) hit a record high in December 2020, with collections of ₹1,15,174 crore, 12% higher than a year ago and 9.7% greater than the previous month's inflows. December marks the fourth month in a row that GST collections have grown year-on-year, after revenues collapsed in the first quarter of 2020-21 amid the COVID-19 lockdown.
- The government said the highest monthly GST collection since the introduction of the indirect tax in 2017, was a reflection of a **rapid economic recovery** under way. It also attributed part of the gains to **better compliance** following an official **crackdown on malpractices** to weed out taxpayers evading GST or using fake bills to defraud the exchequer.
- Among the States, Odisha recorded a 20% growth in GST revenues in December, followed by Rajasthan (16%), Andhra Pradesh (14%) and Gujarat (13%). Revenues grew by 11% in Jharkhand, 10% in West Bengal and Chhattisgarh, and 8% in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.

#### 6. **RBI's digital payment Index**

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has constructed a composite **Digital Payments Index (DPI)** to capture the extent of digitisation of payments across the country. The RBI-DPI has been constructed with March 2018 as the base period. The DPI for March 2019 and March 2020 work out to 153.47 and 207.84 respectively, indicating appreciable growth.
- The RBI-DPI comprises five broad parameters, including **Payment Enablers, Payment Infrastructure** – Demand side factors and SupplySide factors, **Payment Performance** and **Consumer Centricity**.

#### 7. **SEBI imposes fine on Reliance Industries in the RPL case**

- SEBI imposed penalties on Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), its CMD Mukesh Ambani and two other entities for alleged **manipulative trading in the shares** of Reliance Petroleum Ltd. (RPL) in 2007. Fines of ₹25 crore and ₹15 crore have been imposed on RIL and Mr. Ambani, respectively. Navi Mumbai SEZ Pvt. Ltd. has been asked to pay a penalty of ₹20 crore and Mumbai SEZ Ltd., ₹10 crore.

#### 8. **Drop in Forex (Foreign Exchange) Reserves**

- After touching a record high, **India's foreign exchange reserves** declined by \$290 million to **\$580.84 billion** in the week ended December 25, RBI data showed. In the reporting week, the drop in reserves was on account of a **fall in foreign currency assets**.

- **What is Forex?** Foreign exchange reserves are assets held on reserve by a central bank in foreign currencies. These reserves are used to back liabilities and influence monetary policy. It includes any foreign money held by a central bank, deposits, bonds, treasury bills and other government securities. These assets serve many purposes but are most significantly held to ensure that a central government agency has backup funds if their national currency rapidly devalues or becomes all together insolvent.

#### 9. [Trade deficit grows to \\$15 billion in December](#)

- Contracting for the third straight month, India's exports slipped marginally by 0.8% in December 2020 even as the trade deficit widened to \$15.71 billion due to the **rise in imports**. Exports in December 2020 stood at \$26.89 billion, as compared to \$27.11 in the same month of 2019, according to the preliminary data released by the Commerce Ministry. After a gap of nine months, imports in December recorded a positive growth of 7.6% at \$42.6 billion. In February 2020, it had registered a rise of 2.48%.

#### 10. [Rabi foodgrain output to exceed previous record](#)

- The country's **Rabi food grain production**, including wheat, in the ongoing 2020-21 crop year is expected to be better than the previous year's record of 153.27 million tonnes, according to Agriculture Minister **Narendra Singh Tomar**. The *Rabi* sowing begins from October immediately after the harvest of *Kharif* (summer) crops. **Wheat and mustard** are major crops.
- For the 2020-21 crop year, the Centre has set a target of a record food grain output of **301 million tonnes**, out of which it expects 151.65 million tonnes to come from the *Rabi* season.

#### 11. [Vietnam buys Indian rice for first time in decades](#)

- Vietnam, the **world's third biggest exporter of rice**, has started buying grain from rival India for the first time in decades after local prices jumped to their highest in nine years amid limited domestic supplies. The purchases under score tightening supplies in Asia, which could lift rice prices in 2021 and even force traditional buyers of rice from Thailand and Vietnam to switch to India - the world's biggest exporter of the grain.
- *"Indian prices are very attractive. The huge price difference is making exports possible."* Vietnam's 5% broken rice is offered at about \$500-\$505 per tonne, compared to Indian prices of \$381-\$387. In 2020 India exported a record **14 million tonnes of rice**, provisional data from the trade Ministry showed.

#### 12. [Google workers form Union in the United States](#)

- More than 200 Google employees in the U.S. have formed a workers' union, the elected leaders of the union wrote in an NYT opinion piece. The '**Alphabet Workers Union**' aims to ensure that employees work at a fair wage, without fear of abuse, retaliation or discrimination, they wrote. So far, 226 employees had signed union cards with Communications Workers of America.

#### 13. [Manufacturing sector activity strengthened in December](#)

- India's manufacturing sector activity strengthened in December, with manufacturers stepping up production and input buying amid efforts to rebuild their inventories. The seasonally adjusted **IHS Markit India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI)** was at 56.4 in December, a tick higher than November's reading of 56.3. A print above 50 means expansion, while a score below that denotes contraction.
- International demand for Indian goods rose in December, but the growth was hampered by the pandemic. As a result, new export orders rose at the slowest pace in the current four month sequence of expansion. Output growth also eased to a four month low, but remained strong. **Employment** fell again, stretching the current sequence of job shedding to nine months. **Input cost inflation** accelerated to a 26 month high. **Output charges** were lifted in response to rising cost burdens.

#### 14. [Surge in stocks boost Mutual Fund assets](#)

- Mutual fund asset base rose by 7.6% to ₹29.71 lakh crore in the quarter ended December, mainly on account of the rally in equity markets. The average assets under management (AAUM) of the industry, comprising 45 players, was at ₹27.6 lakh crore in July-September quarter, according to data by **Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI)**.
- The surge in asset base comes on the back of excellent stock market performance over the last three months, with Nifty 50 rising by 3.15% in October, 12.02% in November and 14.9% in December. With an asset base of ₹4.56 lakh crore, SBI Mutual Fund continues to be the largest fund house in India during the December quarter.

#### 15. [NYSE holds plans to delist three China telcos](#)

- The **New York Stock Exchange** said it no longer intends to move forward with the delisting of China Mobile Ltd., China Telecom Corp. Ltd. and China Unicom Hong Kong Ltd. Earlier, China's foreign ministry had called the planned delisting of the three companies "*unwise*" and denounced what it said were "*random, arbitrary and uncertain*".

#### 16. [World Bank predicts expansion of global output in FY22](#)

- Global economic output is projected to grow by 4% in 2021 assuming widespread rollout of a COVID-19 vaccine throughout the year, as per the **World Bank's Global Economic Prospects (GEP) report**. This projection is still 5% below pre-pandemic levels. India is expected to grow at 5.4% in fiscal year 2021-22 and 5.2% in fiscal 2022-23 after an expected contraction of 9.6% in fiscal 2020-21.
- India's expected contraction in the current fiscal is due to a sharp decline in household spending and private investment. There was severe income loss in the **informal sector which accounts for four-fifths of employment**. The global recovery has been dampened by the resurgence of the coronavirus but is expected to strengthen as confidence, trade and consumption start improving.
- After an estimated 3.6% contraction in 2020, U.S. GDP is expected to grow at 3.5% in 2021 and the Euro area at 3.6%. **Emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs)** are expected to grow at an average of 4.6% in 2021-22 reflecting the above average rebound in China (forecasted at 7.9% and 5.2%, this year and the next).
- "*Without course correction investment could remain feeble for years to come,*" World Bank Group President David Malpass said, calling for governments, households and firms to respond to the new economic realities - protecting the most vulnerable and supporting policies that allow capital, labour, skills and innovation to shift to new purposes.
- There has been a "massive increase" in **global debt** because of the pandemic with EMDE government debt set to increase by 9 percentage points of GDP in 2020, the report noted. **India's government debt is expected to rise by 17 percentage points** of GDP while service output shrinks over 9%. Private sector debt is also expected to rise sharply.

#### 17. [Bidding for spectrums to start from March 1st](#)

- Bidding for the sixth round of spectrum auction for radio waves worth ₹3.92 lakh crore will start from March 1, according to a notice issued by the **Department of Telecom**. The auction is being held after a gap of four years and more than two years after the **Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI)** calculated and recommended a base price for the radio waves.

#### 18. [SEBI moots entry norms to set up stock exchanges](#)

- The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has floated a discussion paper on review of **ownership and governance norms** to facilitate new entrants to set up stock exchanges and depositories, also called **market infrastructure institutions (MIIs)**.
- As per the key proposals, a **resident promoter** setting up an MII may hold up to 100% shareholding, which will be brought down to not more than (either 51% or 26%) in 10 years. A **foreign promoter** from Financial Action Task Force FATF member jurisdictions setting up an MII may hold up to 49% shareholding, which shall be brought down to not more than (either 26% or 15%) in 10 years. **Foreign individuals or entities from other than FATF member jurisdictions** may acquire or hold up to 10% in an MII.
- Any person other than the promoter may acquire or hold less than 25% shareholding. At least 50% of ownership of the MII may be represented by individuals or entities with experience of five years or more in the areas of capital markets or technology related to financial services.

#### **19. Eurozone contraction could get worse in 2021**

- Eurozone economic activity contracted more sharply than previously thought at the end of 2020 and could get worse this year as renewed restrictions to contain COVID-19 hit the bloc's service industry, an **IHS Markit survey** showed. The economy is expected to gain momentum later this year on vaccine hopes, a December *Reuters* poll found.

#### **20. The National Infrastructure Pipeline**

- Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister **Nirmala Sitharaman** reviewed the progress of the **National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP)** as the government seeks to accelerate infrastructure spending in the economy. The NIP has been expanded from 6,385 projects at the time of its introduction a year ago, to more than 7,300 projects, and is making progress despite the pandemic, the government said in a statement.
- *"The NIP is a part of the Government of India's initiative to provide world-class infrastructure to its citizens and enhance the ease of living"*, she said. The Minister reviewed progress of the NIP, with a specific focus on 34 water and health related infrastructure projects worth ₹3.6 lakh crore.

#### **21. Oil scales 11-month high**

- Oil prices rose to their highest since February 2020 after Saudi Arabia agreed to reduce output. Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, agreed to make additional, voluntary oil output cuts of **1 million barrels per day (bpd)** in February and March, after a meeting with the **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** and other major producers that form the group known as OPEC+.
- With coronavirus infections spreading rapidly in many parts of the world, producers are trying to support prices as demand takes a hit from new lockdowns. Two OPEC+ members - Russia and Kazakhstan - will bump up their output by a combined 75,000 barrels per day, while other producers will hold production steady.





## Sports

### Daily snippets

#### 1. Ronaldo goes past Pele

- Cristiano Ronaldo has surpassed Brazilian legend Pele to become the second highest goal scorer. The Portuguese superstar's brace in Juventus' 4-1 win over Udinese on Sunday took him to 758 career goals, one ahead of Pele. Ronaldo now sits second behind Austrian-Czech legend **Josef Bican**, who, according to FIFA, netted 805 official goals **between 1932 and 1955**.

#### 2. Teimour Radjabov wins

- Teimour Radjabov maintained his calm and outsmarted **Levon Aronian** to win the \$200,000 **Airthings Masters online** rapid chess final. The triumph was worth \$60,000 for Radjabov who became the first player to book his spot in the season finale (in San Francisco in December) of the \$1.5 million Meltwater Champions Chess Tour. For the third place, **Maxime Vachier-Lagrave** beat Daniil Dubov 2.51.5 in the second set after the first ended 22.



## Suggested Readings

1. The Facade of facial neutrality, [Link to article](#)
2. Crucial judgements by the Allahabad HC, [Link to article](#)
3. Leopard counting mechanism, [Link to article](#)
4. The UP Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance's reasoning and Constitutionality, [Link to article](#)
5. Argentina and abortion rights, [Link to article](#)
6. 9th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, [Link to article](#)
7. The right to remain silent, [Link to article](#)
8. Democracy and the need to preserve Human Rights, [Link to article](#)
9. An anti-disclosure amendment that hits public health, [Link to article](#)
10. Fundamental Right to marry in India, [Link to article](#)
11. Supreme Court and 2021, [Link to article](#)
12. Interview with Srinath Reddy on COVID-19 vaccine, [Link to article](#)
13. On vaccine trails, [Link to article](#)
14. Right to Privacy and Free choice and the Supreme Court, [Link to article](#)
15. Revisiting the Pesikaka case, [Link to article](#)
16. Kerala High Court and its record for 2021, [Link to article](#)
17. Approval of COVAXIN, [Link to article](#)
18. How does a bitcoin actually work, [Link to article](#)
19. On Flexible working hours, [Link to article](#)
20. National Infrastructure Pipeline, [Link to article](#)
21. The importance of social interaction, [Link to article](#)

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

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