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Index

Polity and Social Issues

1. Women Entrepreneurship Centre to come up.....	01
2. Border development on centre's radar.....	03
3. Crimes in India: Stats that will send a chill down your spine.....	04
4. National Nutrition Mission given the nod.....	09
5. Indians courts can now decide on international parental child abduction matter.....	11
6. Transgender Persons Bill, 2016, back in the spotlight.....	13
7. India not safe for human rights workers says Amnesty report.....	15
8. OBCs in Central Government.....	16
9. India State-Level Disease Burden report.....	18
10. Best institutes to compete for 'Institute of Eminence tag'.....	19
11. Special Courts to deal with pending cases against MPs and MLAs.....	21
12. UNICEF's Report on well-being of children in digital space.....	21
13. TB patients to given Rs. 500 every month by Central government.....	23
14. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to the rescue.....	24
15. Income inequality in India.....	25
16. Instant triple talaq now an offence.....	26
17. National Medical Commission to replace Medical Council of India.....	27
18. Cabinet approves new scheme for North East.....	28
19. Companies Amendment Bill passed by Parliament.....	28
20. India's First National Rail and Transportation University at Vadodara.....	30
21. Cabinet approves "Scheme for Capacity Building in Textiles Sector (SCBTS)".....	30
22. Bill bolstering Consumer Rights gets Cabinet nod.....	33

23. Supreme Court reiterates that first draft of National Register of Citizens needs to published.....	33
24. India's first air conditioned local train.....	34
25. Home Ministry tightens the screws for NGOs.....	35
26. New anti-trafficking law for the country.....	35
27. Triple Talaq bill passes through Lok Sabha.....	37

Geography, Ecology & Biodiversity

1. Kumbh Mela now an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'.....	38
2. Arsenic is poisoning India.....	39
3. Funds meant for regenerating forests sitting idle.....	41
4. Border development on Centre's radar.....	43

Economy

1. Resource Efficiency- the key to a sustainable future.....	44
2. Centre eases norms on mining.....	45
3. 'Employment' to be redefined.....	47
4. Historic India-Europe trade route set to be operational.....	48
5. Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Report.....	49
6. FRDI Bill clauses aimed at protecting depositors' interests.....	50
7. Andhra Pradesh coastline a mineral paradise.....	52
8. World Trade Organisation meet ends in despair.....	53
9. Leather, footwear sector gets a huge boost.....	53
10. State of cottage industries.....	57
11. India ranked 60th most innovative country on the Global Innovation Index-2017 (recap).....	59

12. CPEC to become Pakistan-Afghanistan-China Economic Corridor.....	60
13. Unemployment scenario in India.....	60
14. Government to borrow Rs 50,000 crore.....	62
15. Cryptocurrency similar to ponzi schemes says Centre.....	63
16. Bankruptcy code Amendments Bill passed by Lower House.....	65

Science and Technology

1. Bio-vacuum toilets to be introduced.....	67
2. India eliminates trachoma.....	68
3. Bio ink used in printing 'life'.....	68
4. Rewind to major scientific innovations of 2017.....	69
5. Pod taxi for India.....	73
6. De-extinction: Can we revive the dead.....	74

Government Schemes and Initiatives

1. National Nutrition Mission given the nod.....	76
2. DARPAN launched for Financial Inclusion of Rural population.....	78
3. National Ayush Mission (NAM) to be continued.....	79
4. Minor irrigation now to be funded under MGNREGS.....	80

International Relations, Summits & Meetings

1. India re-elected as Member of International Maritime Council for two years (2018-19).....	81
2. All weather friends having trouble bonding.....	84
3. USA's new National Security Strategy unveiled.....	85

4. Phase I of Chabahar now operational.....	86
5. ISA to become a Treaty-based International Intergovernmental organization...	89
6. Wassenaar Arrangement welcomes India.....	92
7. World Trade Organisation's Ministerial Conference.....	94
8. 15th edition of Russia-India-China talks.....	95
9. India, Japan and Australia bond over Indo-Pacific talks.....	96
10. Indian diaspora.....	97
11. United Nations rushes to douse Jerusalem fire.....	98
12. Uighurs and their troubled life in China.....	99
13. Enemy properties to be disposed.....	100
14. India needs to benefit or its not happening.....	102

Defence and Internal Security

1. Missiles: Everything you wanted to know.....	103
2. Border Protection Grid to be set up in Border States.....	104
3. INS Kalvari to be inducted into Navy.....	105
4. India successfully tests interceptor missile.....	107

Point Blank (facts for prelims)

1. Exercise Ajeya Warrior 2017.....	108
2. 'Clean Sea-2017' exercise at sea of Port Blair.....	108
3. Global Entrepreneurship Summit.....	108
4. Floating Solar Power Plant in Kerala.....	108
5. Commission to study minority status.....	109

6. Centre for floriculture in Tamil Nadu.....	109
7. Centre to issue universal ID cards.....	109
8. India ranks 100 in global prosperity.....	110
9. Cabinet approves Agreement with UNESCO.....	110
10. Indo-Maldives joint military exercise.....	110
11. 'HAMESHA VIJAYEE' exercises in Rajasthan.....	111
12. 'R-MITRA' app for security of passengers.....	111
13. Scientists discover new frog species.....	111
14. Committee for sub-categorization of OBCs.....	111
15. Highways Investment Promotion Cell.....	112
16. Indian Conducts Exercise Naseem-Al-Bahr.....	112
17. New species of scorpions discovered.....	112
18. 'Blue Flag' Beach Project launched.....	112
19. Govt. Launches Gold Purity Standard.....	113
20. 1st Runway on Sea Bridge in Lakshadweep.....	113
21. Fish discovered inside Meghalaya cave.....	113
22. India's first bitcoin trading app.....	114
23. Countries with highest NPAs: Report.....	114
24. India leads in global milk production.....	114

Polity and Social Issues



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DECEMBER 2017



1. Women Entrepreneurship Centre to come up

What is the issue?

- The country's apex think-tank NITI Aayog will be setting up a cell focused on providing financial support and mentorship to women entrepreneurs.

About the cell:

- It will be called as Women Entrepreneurial and Innovation Cell of NITI Aayog.
- Will offer women support through the Rs. 10000 crore Fund of Funds and Mudra micro loan scheme
- Mentorship in scaling up the businesses will also be provided.

Some stats that you must know:

- Women entrepreneurs constitute only 11 % of Indian startups.
- Only 3 % of women entrepreneurs have received Venture Capital funding.

Niti Aayog:

Nature of organization

- Cabinet resolution was passed to replace the Planning Commission with the newly formed NITI Aayog.

Established in which year and under which act?

- Effectively replaced the Planning Commission of India

Chairman/President?

- Prime Minister

Members

- Governing Council composed of Chief Ministers of all the States and Union territories with Legislatures and lieutenant governor of Andaman and Nicobar.

- Regional Councils composed of Chief Ministers of States and Lt. Governors of Union Territories in the region to address specific issues and contingencies impacting more than one state or a region.
- Full-time organizational framework composed of a Vice-Chairperson, three full-time members, two part-time members (from leading universities, research organizations and other relevant institutions in an ex-officio capacity), four ex-officio members of the Union Council of Ministers, a Chief Executive Officer (with the rank of Secretary to the Government of India) who looks after administration, and a secretariat.
- Experts and specialists in various fields.

Functions/Objectives of the organization

- To evolve a shared vision of national development priorities sectors and strategies with the active involvement of States in the light of national objectives.
- To foster cooperative federalism through structured support initiatives and mechanisms with the States on a continuous basis, recognizing that strong States make a strong nation
- To develop mechanisms to formulate credible plans at the village level and aggregate these progressively at higher levels of government.
- To ensure, on areas that are specifically referred to it, that the interests of national security are incorporated in economic strategy and policy.
- To pay special attention to the sections of our society that may be at risk of not benefiting adequately from economic progress.
- To design strategic and long term policy and programme frameworks and initiatives, and monitor their progress and their efficacy. The lessons learnt through monitoring and feedback will be used for making innovative improvements, including necessary mid-course corrections
- To provide advice and encourage partnerships between key stakeholders and national and international like-minded Think tanks, as well as educational and policy research institutions.

- To create a knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurial support system through a collaborative community of national and international experts, practitioners and other partners.
- To offer a platform for resolution of inter- sectoral and inter- departmental issues in order to accelerate the implementation of the development agenda.
- To maintain a state-of-the-art Resource Centre, be a repository of research on good governance and best practices in sustainable and equitable development as well as help their dissemination to stake-holders.
- To actively monitor and evaluate the implementation of programmes and initiatives, including the identification of the needed resources so as to strengthen the probability of success and scope of delivery.
- To focus on technology up gradation and capacity building for implementation of programmes and initiatives
- To undertake other activities as may be necessary in order to further the execution of the national development agenda, and the objectives mentioned above.

2. Border development on Centre's radar

What is the issue?

- Union Home Ministry has released Rs 167 crore to nine states with international border for the development of infrastructure in forward areas.

States that will benefit from the initiative:

- Meghalaya, Punjab, Rajasthan, Bihar, Sikkim, Tripura, Assam, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal.

About the initiative:

- An amount of Rs 167 crore was released recently by the home ministry to Meghalaya, Punjab, Rajasthan, Bihar, Sikkim, Tripura, Assam, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal under the Border Area Development Programme (BADP).

- The fully centrally funded BADP programme covers all villages which are located within 0-10 km of the international border in 17 states.
- Priority is given to those villages which are identified by border guarding forces for speedy development of infrastructure.
- The schemes permissible under the BADP include activities relating to the cleanliness mission, skill development programmes, promotion of sports activities, promotion of rural tourism, border tourism and protection of heritage sites.
- Construction of helipads in remote and inaccessible hilly areas which do not have road connectivity, skill development training to farmers for the use of modern and scientific technique in farming, organic farming are other areas which come under the BADP.

International borders:

- Rajasthan and Punjab share border with Pakistan
- West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya share boundary with Bangladesh.
- Bihar shares border with Nepal
- Sikkim shares border with Nepal and Bhutan
- Himachal Pradesh shares its border with China.

3. Crimes in India: Stats that will send a chill down your spine

What is the issue?

- National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report on crime in 2016 has thrown light on the various crimes and their frequency in India
- For the first time this year, the NCRB has released not just state-wise data, but also specific data on metropolitan cities.

Highlights of the report (Not advisable to read the numbers, understand the general trend)

IPC / SLL Crimes (States/UTs)

- A total of 48,31,515 cognizable crimes comprising 29,75,711 Indian Penal Code (IPC) crimes and 18,55,804 Special & Local Laws (SLL) crimes were reported in 2016, showing an increase of 2.6% over 2015 (47,10,676 cases). IPC Crimes have increased by 0.9% (from 29,49,400 in 2015 to 29,75,711 in 2016). SLL Crimes have increased by 5.4% (from 17,61,276 in 2015 to 18,55,804 in 2016).
- Uttar Pradesh accounted for 9.5% of total IPC crime reported in the country followed by Madhya Pradesh (8.9%), Maharashtra (8.8%) and Kerala (8.7).
- Delhi UT reported the highest crime rate (974.9) under IPC crimes followed by Kerala (727.6) and Madhya Pradesh (337.9) against national average of 233.6.
- During the year 2016, IPC Crimes have reported a charge sheeting rate of 72.9% while conviction rate is 46.8% in the country.
- A total of 37,37,870 persons were arrested, a total of 32,71,262 persons were charge sheeted, 7,94,616 persons were convicted and 11,48,824 persons were acquitted or discharged in 2016.

Violent Crimes

- Murder cases in the country have shown declining trends during the last three years. Murder cases decreased by 5.2% from 32,127 cases in 2015 to 30,450 cases in 2016.
- Uttar Pradesh (4,889 cases) reported the highest number of cases of murder accounting for 16.1% followed by Bihar 2,581 (8.4%) cases during 2016.
- Cases of Kidnapping and Abduction have shown an increasing trend with the increase of 6% in 2016 (88,008) over 2015 (82,999).
- Cases under Rioting have decreased by 5% in 2016 (61,974) over 2015 (65,255).
- Cases under Robbery have decreased by 11.8% in 2016 (31,906) over 2015 (36,188).

Crime against Women

- Cases under Crime against Women have reported increase of 2.9% in 2016 over 2015. Majority of cases under crimes against women were reported under 'Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives' (32.6%) followed by 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' (25.0%), 'Kidnaping & Abduction of Women' (19.0%) and 'Rape' (11.5%).
- Uttar Pradesh reported 14.5% (49,262) of total cases of crimes against women followed by West Bengal (9.6%) (32,513 cases) during 2016. Delhi UT reported the highest crime rate (160.4) compared to the national average rate of 55.2.
- Rape cases have reported increase of 12.4% from 34,651 cases in 2015 to 38,947 in 2016. Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh reported the highest incidence of Rape with 4,882 cases (12.5%) and 4,816 (12.4%) followed by Maharashtra 4,189 (10.7%) during 2016.

D. Crime against Children

- Crime against Children have shown increasing trend over the past 3 years with the significant increase of 13.6% (1, 06,958) in 2016 over (94,172) 2015. Kidnapping and Abduction of Children accounted for 52.3% of the cases followed by Cases Reported under POCSO i.e. 34.4%.

E. Juveniles in Conflict with Law

- Cases reported under "Juveniles in Conflict with Law" have shown a mixed trend for the past three years with the decline of 13.1% in 2015 (33,433) over 2014 (38,455) followed by an increase of 7.2% in 2016 (35,849) over 2015.
- 20.6% (7,369) of cases under juveniles in conflict with law were reported in Madhya Pradesh followed by 18.4% in Maharashtra (6,606) during 2016.

F. Atrocities/Crime against SC/ST

- Atrocities/Crime against Scheduled Castes have increased by 5.5% in 2016 (40,801) over 2015 (38,670).
- Uttar Pradesh (10,426 cases) reported the highest number of cases of atrocities against Scheduled Castes (SCs) accounting for 25.6% followed by Bihar with 14% (5,701) and Rajasthan with 12.6% (5,134) during 2016.

STs

- Atrocities/Crime against Scheduled Tribes have increased by 4.7% in 2016 (6,568) over 2015 (6,276).
- Madhya Pradesh (1,823 cases) reported the highest number of cases of atrocities against Scheduled Tribes (STs) accounting for 27.8% followed by Rajasthan with 18.2% (1,195 cases) and Odisha with 10.4% (681 cases) during 2016.

G. Cyber Crimes

- Incidence of Cyber Crime has shown an increasing trend by 6.3% increase in 2016 (12,317) over 2015 (11,592).
- Uttar Pradesh (2,639 cases) reported the highest number of cases of Cyber Crimes accounting for 21.4% followed by Maharashtra with 19.3% (2,380 cases) and Karnataka with 8.9% (1101 cases) during 2016.

H. Offences against Property

- Delhi UT reported maximum number of cases (1, 30,928 cases) followed by Maharashtra (59,097 cases) and Uttar Pradesh (56,550 cases) accounting for 26.5%, 11.9% and 11.4% of total theft cases respectively.
- During 2016, out of total theft (4, 94,404 cases), 2, 13,765 cases (43.2%) were auto theft cases of which Delhi UT (38,644 cases) has reported maximum auto theft cases followed by Uttar Pradesh (34,480 cases) and Maharashtra (22,435 cases).

I. Human Trafficking

- A total of 8,132 cases of Human Trafficking were reported in the country with West Bengal reporting the highest number of cases (3,579) sharing nearly 44% followed by Rajasthan (1,422) sharing 17.9% of such cases in the country. However, a total of 15,379 persons were trafficked during the year including 58.7% children.
- A total of 23,117 persons were rescued during the year in the country, Children constituting 61.3% of the victims rescued (including victims of previous year).

J. Missing Persons (including Children)

- A total of 5,49,008 persons (2,34,334 males and 3,14,674 females) were reported missing in 2016 of which maximum persons missing were reported from Maharashtra 17.2% (94,919 persons) during 2016. A total of 2,29,381 persons (1,39,858 males and 89,523 females) were traced at the end of the year (including previous year) in the country.
- A total of 1,11,569 children (41,175 males and 70,394 females) were reported missing in which maximum children missing were reported from West Bengal (15.1%) during 2016. A total of 55,944 children were traced at the end of the year (including previous year) in the country.

K. Seizures

- **Arms:** A total of 53,929 cases were registered under the Arms Act, 1959 in which 56,516 Arms (37,116 fire arms) were seized. A total of 1,06,900 number of ammunitions were seized during 2016. Uttar Pradesh (27,189 Arms) has reported maximum number of seizure followed by Madhya Pradesh (8,019 Arms) and Rajasthan (5,757 Arms) during 2016.
- **FICN:** A total of 2,81,839 notes worth Rs. 15,92,50,181 were seized under Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) during 2016. Delhi UT 1,14,751 notes (worth Rs. 5,65,21,460) has reported maximum number of seizure of Fake Indian Currency Notes followed by Gujarat 39,725 notes (worth Rs. 2,37,24,050) and West Bengal 32,869 notes (worth Rs. 2,32,95,800) during 2016.
- **Drugs:** A total 3,50,862 Kg drugs were seized by various Agencies during 2016, out of which Ganja (2,94,347 Kg), Methaqualone (24,107 Kg), Ephedrine/Pseudo Ephedrine (21,273 Kg), Hashish (2,805 Kg) and Heroin (1,675 kg) were seized.

CRIME ANALYSIS IN 19 METROS

- Delhi City accounted for 38.8% of total IPC crime reported in the cities followed by Bengaluru (8.9%) and Mumbai (7.7%).
- Chennai has reported highest number of cases of SLL crimes, accounting for 32.9% of total SLL crimes reported amongst 19 metropolitan cities followed by Kochi (12.9%) and Surat (12.6%) during 2016.

Violent Crimes:

- Delhi (5,453 cases) reported the highest number of cases of kidnapping & abduction accounting (48.3%) followed by Mumbai with 16.6% (1,876 cases) and Bengaluru with 7.8% (879 cases) during 2016.
- Delhi City reported 21.8%, the highest number of Murder cases (479 out of 2194) followed by Bengaluru 10.4% (229 cases) and Patna 8.9% (195 cases).

Crime against Women:

- Delhi reported 33.0% (13,803 out of 41,761 cases) of total cases of crimes against women followed by Mumbai (12.3%) (5,128 cases) during 2016. Delhi reported the highest crime rate (182.1) compared to the national average rate of 77.2.
- Delhi City reported nearly 40% of Rape Cases and nearly 29% each of Cruelty by Husband and his relatives and Dowry Deaths.

Juveniles in Conflict with law:

- Highest numbers of cases under juveniles in conflict with law were reported in Delhi City (amongst 19 Metropolitan Cities) 35.6% (2368 cases out of 6645) during 2016.

Economic Offences:

- Delhi (5,942 cases) has reported the maximum number of cases under economic offences accounting for 19.3% followed by Jaipur (4,742 cases) and Mumbai (4,191 cases) accounting for 15.4% and 13.6% during 2016 respectively.

Cyber Crimes:

- Mumbai (980 cases out of 4172 cases) has reported maximum number of cases under cyber-crime accounting to 23.5% during 2016.

4. National Nutrition Mission given the nod

What is the issue?

- Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister has approved setting up of National Nutrition Mission (NNM) with a three year budget of Rs.9046.17 crore commencing from 2017-18.

Features:

- The NNM, as an apex body, will monitor, supervise, fix targets and guide the nutrition related interventions across the Ministries.

The proposal consists of

- Mapping of various Schemes contributing towards addressing malnutrition
- Introducing a very robust convergence mechanism
- ICT based Real Time Monitoring system Incentivizing States/UTs for meeting the targets
- Incentivizing Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) for using IT based tools
- Eliminating registers used by AWWs
- Introducing measurement of height of children at the Anganwadi Centres (AWCs)
- Social Audits
- Setting-up Nutrition Resource Centres, involving masses through Jan Andolan for their participation on nutrition through various activities, among others.

What does the programme aim to achieve?

- The programme through the targets will strive to reduce the level of stunting, under-nutrition, anemia and low birth weight babies.
- It will create synergy, ensure better monitoring, issue alerts for timely action, and encourage States/UTs to perform, guide and supervise the line Ministries and States/UTs to achieve the targeted goals.

Benefits and coverage:

- More than 10 crore people will be benefitted by this programme.
- All the States and districts will be covered in a phased manner i.e. 315 districts in 2017-18, 235 districts in 2018-19 and remaining districts in 2019-20.

Financial Outlay:

- An amount of Rs. 9046.17 crore will be expended for three years commencing from 2017-18.
- This will be funded by Government Budgetary Support (50%) and 50% by IBRD or other MDB.
- Government budgetary support would be 60:40 between Centre and States/UTs, 90:10 for NER and Himalayan States and 100% for UTs without legislature.
- Total Government of India share over a period of three years would be Rs. 2849.54 crore.

Implementation strategy and targets:

- Implementation strategy would be based on intense monitoring and Convergence Action Plan right upto the grass root level.
- NNM will be rolled out in three phases from 2017-18 to 2019-20.
- NNM targets to reduce stunting, under-nutrition, anemia (among young children, women and adolescent girls) and reduce low birth weight by 2%, 2%, 3% and 2% per annum respectively.
- Although the target to reduce Stunting is atleast 2% p.a., Mission would strive to achieve reduction in Stunting from 38.4% (NFHS-4) to 25% by 2022 (Mission 25 by 2022).

1. Kumbh Mela now an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'

What is the issue?

- Kumbh Mela, the largest congregation of pilgrims on the planet, has been listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage under UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation).

About the UNESCO's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' list:

- UNESCO established its Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage with the aim of ensuring better protection of important intangible cultural heritages worldwide and the awareness of their significance.
- This list is published by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and its members are elected by State parties meeting in UN General Assembly
- Through a compendium of the different oral and intangible treasures of humankind worldwide, the program aims to draw attention to the importance of safeguarding intangible heritage, which UNESCO has identified as an essential component and as a repository of cultural diversity and of creative expression.
- The list was established in 2008 when the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage took effect.
- As of 2010 the programme compiles two lists.
 1. The longer Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity comprises cultural "practices and expressions [that] help demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness about its importance."
 2. The shorter List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding is composed of those cultural elements that concerned communities and countries consider require urgent measures to keep them alive.

About Kumbh Mela

- This mass Hindu Pilgrimage is revered as one of the largest peaceful gatherings in the entire world.
- The term 'Kumbh' is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning 'pitcher.'
- While, the term 'Mela' means 'gathering.' This tradition is so ancient and sacred, that it was even included in the travel accounts of Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang, when he visited India in 629-645 BCE.

Origin of Kumbh Mela

- The origin of this auspicious gathering dates back to the presence of Gods and Demons on earth.
- According to Hindu Mythology, when all Gods and Goddesses became weak due to a herculean curse, then Lord God Brahma, the creator of this Universe, suggested them to churn the Milky Ocean for Amrita (nectar of immortality).
- It is believed that the 'Amrita' was the nectar of immortality. Therefore, untiring efforts had been made by Gods and Asuras (demons) to obtain the same.
- They started churning the ocean and this significant event is known as 'Samudramanathan'.
- It started with the Mandara Mountain as the churning rod and Vasuki, a kind of serpent as the rope. After churning the ocean for around 1,000 years, Dhanwantari, the divine healer appeared with holding a Kumbh (Pitcher).

Significance of Kumbh Mela

- This largest spiritual and religious gathering in the world has a lot of significance.
- It is believed that once every 12 years, when the Maha Kumbha Mela is observed, the sacred river itself transforms into sanctity spots, holding the primordial nectar. The pilgrims get to wash their sins, rejuvenate their lives and taste salvation.

Where is it celebrated?

- Kumbh Mela is celebrated only 4 times in every 12 years. The religious celebration site keeps rotating in between four pilgrimages.
- These respective pilgrimages are located on the banks of the most sacred rivers of Hinduism
- In Maharashtra: In Nashik on Godavari
- In Uttarakhand: In Haridwar on Ganges
- In Madhya Pradesh: In Ujjain on Shipra
- In Uttar Pradesh: In Allahabad on the rare confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati.

Rituals of Kumbh Mela

- The ritual bath for cleansing one's soul is the most important aspect of rituals in Kumbh Mela. The devout Hindus believe that taking a dip in the sacred river on the most auspicious day of the new moon will forgive their sins, thereby terminating the cycle of birth and death. Right from 3 o' clock in the morning, the pilgrims start assembling in lines
- The other rituals include devotional singing, religious assemblies, mass-feeding and debates on religious doctrines. The order of entering into the sacred river is already fixed. The Naga Sadhus (who do not wear cloth, their forehead is smeared with ash and they are not affected by material possessions) enter first. They are followed by Urdhwavahurs, Parivajakas and Shirshasins.

2. Arsenic is poisoning India

What is the issue?

- About 239 million people across 153 districts in 21 states drink water that contains unacceptably high levels of arsenic in India. These people are being poisoned in the long run.

What do the numbers reveal?

- 65% of Assam's population, or about 21 million people, is drinking arsenic-contaminated water, while it's 60% in Bihar and 44% in West Bengal.
- In terms of absolute numbers, however, Uttar Pradesh has the largest number of people, over 70 million, exposed to arsenic-contaminated water.
- States like Maharashtra, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Goa, Tripura and Arunachal have not reported arsenic contamination in groundwater in any district.
- Odisha and Rajasthan are among the least affected states, with just one district in each having high arsenic levels in groundwater
- WHO's guideline value for acceptable levels of arsenic in drinking water is 0.01mg/litre. In these 153 districts, the arsenic level in groundwater is above this benchmark.

Effects of long term arsenic intake:

- World Health Organisation has warned that longterm intake of such water leads to arsenic poisoning or arsenicosis, with cancer of skin, bladder, kidney or lung, or diseases of skin (colour changes, and hard patches on palms and soles), or blood vessels of legs and feet.
- Fresh evidence indicates a possible association between intake of contaminated water and onset of diabetes, hypertension and reproductive disorders, states a WHO document.

1. Resource Efficiency- the key to a sustainable future

What is the issue?

- NITI Aayog in collaboration with the European Union delegation to India and the Confederation of Indian Industries, has released the first ever Strategy on Resource Efficiency for India which also includes an action plan for promoting resource efficiency in India.

Highlights of the strategy:

The Resource Efficiency Strategy includes the core-action plan for the period 2017-2018 and medium term action plan for 2017 – 2020 with the following key elements:

- Institutional development including setting up an inter-departmental committee and Task force of experts,
- Capacity development at various levels for strengthening of capacities and sharing of best practices,
- Development of an indicator monitoring framework for baseline analysis
- Launch of Short term course on RE under the MHRD GIAN Programme
- Promotional and regulatory tools in selected sectors (automotive and construction) such as Ecolabeling for Secondary Raw Material (SRM) products, recycling standards, R&D and Technology Development, Sustainable Public Procurement, development of Industrial clusters and waste-exchange platform, information sharing & awareness generation along with development of sectoral action plans.
- The strategy implementation would also identify need for setting up a Bureau for Resource Efficiency (BRE) which creates a prominence and enabling platform for this topic like the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) in India.

What is 'resource efficiency' and what are its benefits?

- Resource efficiency is a strategy to achieve the maximum possible benefit with least possible resource input.
- Fostering resource efficiency aims at governing and intensifying resource utilization in a purposeful and effective way.
- Such judicious resource use brings about multiple benefits along the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental.

2. Centre eases norms on mining

What is the issue?

- In an attempt to generate fresh interest from miners for auctions of mineral blocks, the government has amended the rules to allow wider participation and reduce the chances of auctions getting called off for want of bidders.

Norms relaxed/changed:

- Auctions will not be cancelled if there are fewer than three bidders from the second round onwards. Earlier, three bidders were required up to the third round for an auction not to be cancelled.
- The revised rules also sharply reduce the net worth requirement for eligible bidders from Rs 4 crore to Rs 50 lakh for blocks with average annual production of up to Rs 2 crore.
- It has been slashed from Rs 40 crore to Rs 10 crore in the case of mines, with average annual production of up to Rs 20 crore.
- Rigid end-use conditions on minerals excavated from a block have been done away with. Miners can now dispose of 25% of unused low-grade ore.

Why this move to relax norms?

- To rekindle investor interest in a process that has been marred by failed auctions.
- Centre is looking to auction more than 100 blocks over the next 15 months with a potential value of about ₹2 lakh crore.

- Centre aims to spur increased interest in the upcoming auctions, 34 mineral blocks are in the pipeline for the rest of 2017--18.

3. 'Employment' to be redefined

What is the issue?

- Job creation in the formal sector has been the slowest in almost a decade.
- Government is mulling over the issue of job creation not being captured by the existing system which only looks at the formal sector.
- A task force to look into the issue has also been constituted in this regard.

Problems being faced:

- There is no fixed definition of formal sector workers currently in India.
- All definitions are highly restrictive, and exclude many workers who have decent and steady jobs but either do not work in large enough enterprises or do not have written contracts

Task force and its recommendations:

- 'Task Force on Improving Employment Data', has prepared a draft report in this regard suggesting several measures.
- Among the main recommendations could be a change in the definition of employment/workers as well as ways to include and measure employment in the informal sector
- The plan is to include workers covered the Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948, Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provision Act, 1952, workers having coverage under private insurance or pension schemes or provident funds as well as workers subject to tax deduction at source on their income through submission of Form 16 or similar Income Tax form.
- The panel had identified the Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency (MUDRA) scheme, which provides small, unsecured loans to enterprises, as an important source of job creation.

4. Historic India-Europe trade route set to be operational

What is the issue?

- The International North-South Transport Corridor will be operationalized after nearly 17 years.

Major development for India and Central Asia:

- The first consignment to Russia will be flagged off from Mumbai in mid-January, 2018, land in Bandar Abbas, Iran, and move overland and via barge to Russia's Astrakhan region, bypassing Pakistan.

What advantages does this new route offer?

- Transport cost and transit time to Europe stand nearly halved through the route.
- Current geopolitics gives the corridor new significance due to the opportunities it opens for India in Central Asia.

About the corridor:

- International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) initiated in 2000 by Russia, India and Iran, is a multi-modal transportation route linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.
- The INSTC envisages the movement of goods from Mumbai, India to Bandar Abbas, Iran, by sea, from Bandar Abbas to Bandar-e-Anzali, an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea, by road, from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian port in the Russian Federation, by ship across the Caspian Sea, and thereafter into the Russian Federation and further into Europe by Russian Railways.
- INSTC could boost trade to a total of US\$ 170 billion from India to Eurasia (60.6 billion in export and 107.4 billion in import)

1. Bio-vacuum toilets to be introduced

What is the issue?

- Indian railways planning to roll out first 100 coaches with bio-vacuum toilets like the ones used in passenger airplanes in the near future.
- If successful, they will replace the bio-toilet system all over.

Problems faced with bio-toilets

- Lack of maintenance
- Bio-digester toilets were giving off an overpowering stench on account of the improper functioning of mechanical peripherals fitted in them.
- Toilets were getting jammed often, not only because passengers were tossing bottles, cigarette butts, gutka (chewable tobacco mix) packets and soiled sanitary napkins into them but also because mechanical fixtures such as valves were non-functional.
- Water pressure available for flushing in these toilets was inadequate (bio-digesters need five litres of water per flush).
- Mounting and securing apparatus of the toilet tanks were faulty, leading to regular breakage of rubber connector and safety wires.

About bio-vacuum toilets:

- It has a suction pump that sucks waste without the need for much water to flush it.
- Only consumes 500 ml per flush whereas bio-toilet consumes 10-15 litres per flush.
- Cost is Rs. 3.25 lakh per bio-vacuum toilet.

2. India eliminates trachoma

What is the issue?

- India has eliminated infective trachoma, a leading cause of blindness in the world.
- The health ministry's latest trachoma survey report (2014-17) showed that the disease's overall prevalence was way below the World Health Organization's elimination criterion, which is less than 5% in children under 10 years of age.

About trachoma:

- Trachoma is a chronic infective eye disease and a leading cause of blindness globally.
- Caused by poor environmental and personal hygiene, and inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, the disease affects the conjunctiva under eyelids.
- Repeated infections can cause damage to the cornea and blindness.
- It was the most important cause of corneal blindness in India, affecting children.

Prevalence in India:

- The disease was found common in certain pockets of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Nicobar Islands.
- Trachoma infection of the eyes was the most important cause of blindness in India in 1950s and over 50% of them were in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

3. Bio ink used in printing 'life'

What is the issue?

- A new printing material called 'ink', short for 'functional living ink', has been developed by scientists at ETH Zurich in Switzerland.

About the ink:

- Bacteria- containing ink that makes it possible to print mini--biochemical factories with certain properties, depending on which species of bacteria the scientists add to the ink.

Bacterial species used in the process:

- *Pseudomonas putida* : can break down the toxic chemical phenol, which is produced on a large scale in the chemical industry.
- *Acetobacter xyloxydans* : secretes high- purity Nano-cellulose

Application of the technology:

- Medical applications are numerous. The example mentioned above relieves pain, retains moisture, and is stable, opening up potential applications in the treatment of burns.

Technique:

- In a single pass, scientists can use up to four different inks containing different species of bacteria at different concentrations in order to produce objects exhibiting several properties.
- The ink is composed of a biocompatible hydrogel that provides structure.
- The culture medium for the bacteria is mixed into the ink so that the bacteria have all the prerequisites for life.

1. National Nutrition Mission given the nod

What is the issue?

- Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister has approved setting up of National Nutrition Mission (NNM) with a three year budget of Rs.9046.17 crore commencing from 2017-18.

Features:

- The NNM, as an apex body, will monitor, supervise, fix targets and guide the nutrition related interventions across the Ministries.

The proposal consists of

- Mapping of various Schemes contributing towards addressing malnutrition
- Introducing a very robust convergence mechanism
- ICT based Real Time Monitoring system Incentivizing States/UTs for meeting the targets
- Incentivizing Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) for using IT based tools
- Eliminating registers used by AWWs
- Introducing measurement of height of children at the Anganwadi Centres (AWCs)
- Social Audits and Setting-up Nutrition Resource Centres, involving masses through Jan Andolan for their participation on nutrition through various activities, among others.

What does the programme aim to achieve?

- The programme through the targets will strive to reduce the level of stunting, under-nutrition, anemia and low birth weight babies.
- It will create synergy, ensure better monitoring, issue alerts for timely action, and encourage States/UTs to perform, guide and supervise the line Ministries and States/UTs to achieve the targeted goals.

Benefits and coverage:

- More than 10 crore people will be benefitted by this programme.
- All the States and districts will be covered in a phased manner i.e. 315 districts in 2017-18, 235 districts in 2018-19 and remaining districts in 2019-20.

Financial Outlay:

- An amount of Rs. 9046.17 crore will be expended for three years commencing from 2017-18.
- This will be funded by Government Budgetary Support (50%) and 50% by IBRD or other MDB.
- Government budgetary support would be 60:40 between Centre and States/UTs, 90:10 for NER and Himalayan States and 100% for UTs without legislature.
- Total Government of India share over a period of three years would be Rs. 2849.54 crore.

Implementation strategy and targets:

- Implementation strategy would be based on intense monitoring and Convergence Action Plan right upto the grass root level.
- NNM will be rolled out in three phases from 2017-18 to 2019-20.
- NNM targets to reduce stunting, under-nutrition, anemia (among young children, women and adolescent girls) and reduce low birth weight by 2%, 2%, 3% and 2% per annum respectively.
- Although the target to reduce Stunting is atleast 2% p.a., Mission would strive to achieve reduction in Stunting from 38.4% (NFHS-4) to 25% by 2022 (Mission 25 by 2022).

2. DARPAN launched For Financial Inclusion of Rural Population

What is the issue?

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

What is the need for such a project?

- In order to provide the best-in-class customer service, deliver new services and improve operational efficiencies, the Department of Posts has undertaken an end to end IT modernization project to equip itself with requisite modern tools and technologies.

Goal of the project:

- To provide a low power technology solution to each Branch Postmaster (BPM) which will enable each of approximately 1.29 Lakhs Branch Post Offices (BOs) to improve the level of services being offered to rural customers across all the states.
- The Project shall increase the rural reach of the Department of Posts and enable BOs to increase traffic of all financial remittances, savings accounts, Rural Postal Life Insurance, and Cash Certificates.
- It will improve mail operation processes by allowing for automated booking and delivery

Challenges ahead for Department of Posts:

- Trends such as urbanization, increased demand for financial services, increased funding by the government for the weaker sections and the rural sector, have opened up new opportunities for the Department of Posts, which in turn has necessitated development of new processes and supporting technology.
- The Department of Posts is also faced with twin challenges of increasing competition and continuing advances in communication technology, especially in mobile telephony and the internet.

1. India re-elected as Member of International Maritime Council for two years (2018-19)

What is the issue?

- India has been re-elected to the Council of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) under Category “B”.

About the re-election:

- The IMO Council consists of 40 member countries.
- In Categories “A” and “B” there are 10 members each and in Category “C” 20 members, who are elected by the IMO Assembly.
- IMO Council plays a crucial role to play in deciding various important matters within the mandate of the IMO, in relation to the global shipping industry, including its work programme strategy and budget.

India and International Maritime Organization:

- India has been one of the earliest members of the IMO, having ratified its Convention and joined it as a member-state in the year 1959.
- India has had the privilege of being elected to and serving the Council of the IMO, ever since it started functioning, and till date, except for two years for the period 1983-1984.
- India is a party to 34 IMO Conventions and protocols and is currently in the advanced stage of ratifying Ballast Water Convention and Bunker Convention.
- India has already deposited with the ILO, instrument of ratification of the Seafarers’ Identity Documents Convention (revised), 2003 and Maritime Labour Convention, 2006.
- India continues to provide services of its expert manpower to the IMO, as and when required.
- The IMO’s panel of auditors for the Voluntary IMO Member State Audit Scheme (VIMSAS) and Goal Based Standards (CBS) has a number of auditors from India.

- A number of domain experts also participate in the meetings of working groups constituted by IMO Committees.
- With re-election in IMO, India will continue to engage with the international maritime community to further her maritime interests and promote the welfare of her citizens.

International Maritime Organization

- International Maritime Organization – is the United Nations specialized agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships.
- It has 171 Member States and three Associate Members.
- The IMO's primary purpose is to develop and maintain a comprehensive regulatory framework for shipping and its remit today includes safety, environmental concerns, legal matters, technical cooperation, maritime security and the efficiency of shipping.
- The IMO's structure comprises
 1. The Assembly
 2. The Council
 3. The Maritime Safety Committee
 4. The Marine Environment Protection Committee
 5. The Legal Committee
 6. The Technical Cooperation Committee and
 7. The secretariat, headed by a Secretary-General.

2. All weather friends having trouble bonding

What is the issue?

- China has decided to temporarily stop funding at least three major road projects in Pakistan, being built as part of the \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, following reports of corruption.

Impact of the decision:

- The decision by the Chinese government is likely to hit over 1 trillion Pakistani rupees worth of road projects of the Pakistan's National Highway Authority (NHA), and initially, may delay at least three such ventures.
- China will reportedly go forward only after issues are sorted out and new 'guidelines' are adhered to by Pakistan.
- The nearly \$60 billion CPEC, a flagship project of China's prestigious One Belt One Road, passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

- It links China's restive Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Balochistan province.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

- China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connects Xinjiang province in North West China with deep water Gwadar port on the Arabian sea of south western Pakistan.
- CPEC is facing challenges from Islamic militants from both the regions.
- CPEC is said to be enhancing
 1. Geographical linkage between two regions through improved rail, road and air transportation.
 2. Exchange of growth and People to people contact.
 3. Better understanding through academic, culture and regional knowledge.
 4. High volume of trade and business.

Why India concerned about CPEC?

- India considers it as breach of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- India is concerned about the Security issues.
- China can enter into warm waters of Indian Ocean through Pakistan as part of its geo-strategic gains.
- If and if India approaches international court on matters of disputed area, judgment will come in favour of Pakistan on claiming ownership of the disputed area. This is because Pakistan invested heavily in this region.

3. USA's new National Security Strategy unveiled

What is the issue?

- India has been hailed as 'leading global power' by USA's new National Security Strategy while it acknowledges India's growing role at the international stage.

What the document says about India:

- US will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India. "We welcome India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defence partner," said the National Security Strategy.
- "We will expand our defence and security cooperation with India, a Major Defence Partner of the United States, and support India's growing relationships throughout the region,".
- Noting that its vision for Indo-Pacific excludes no nation. India-US defence relationship was mentioned in the context of Indo-Pacific region, whereas it gave a very prominent role to India in South and Central Asia.
- "We will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region," according to the NSS which the White House said sets a positive strategic direction for the US that will restore America's advantages in the world and build upon its strengths.

- With an eye on China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the US said it will help South Asian countries "maintain their sovereignty" as China increases its influence in the region.

Act against terrorists

- The US also asked Pakistan to take "decisive action" against terror groups operating on its soil.
- US will also encourage Pakistan to continue demonstrating that it is a responsible steward of its nuclear assets.
- "We have made clear to Pakistan that while we desire continued partnership, we must see decisive action against terrorist groups operating on their territory. And we make massive payments every year to Pakistan. They have to help," Trump said in his remarks while announcing the NSS.

4. Phase I of Chabahar now operational

What is the issue?

- Iran President opened the first phase of the Shahid Beheshti Port (Chabahar port) in the southeastern city of Chabahar that bypasses Pakistan and opens up a new strategic transit route between Iran, India and Afghanistan.

About the new extension:

- The port, whose new extension will take its capacity from 2.5 million tonnes to 8 million tonnes of cargo a year, is seen as an important route for India and Afghanistan to bypass obstacles posed by Pakistan for trade on the direct route.

Why is it important for India?

- It is seen as a feeder port to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to Russia as well as land route to Central Asia.
- It is seen as a rival to the Chinese-built Gwadar port off Pakistan, about 80 km away, which is a critical link in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.
- Would contribute to bilateral and regional trade and economic development and also provide alternate access to landlocked Afghanistan to regional and global markets

Russian connection:

- International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) initiated in 2000 by Russia, India and Iran, is a multi-modal transportation route linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.
- The INSTC envisages the movement of goods from Mumbai, India to Bandar Abbas, Iran, by sea, from Bandar Abbas to Bandar-e-Anzali, an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea, by road, from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian port in the Russian Federation, by ship across the Caspian Sea, and thereafter into the Russian Federation and further into Europe by Russian Railways.
- INSTC could boost trade to a total of US\$ 170 billion from India to Eurasia (60.6 billion in export and 107.4 billion in import)

India and Chabahar Port:

Background:

- It was in 2003 that India and Iran first agreed to develop the Chabahar port, located in the Gulf of Oman near Iran's border with Pakistan, to allow New Delhi to reach markets in Afghanistan and landlocked Central Asia.
- The project was delayed due to international sanctions on Iran over its suspect nuclear programme and India's focus on concluding a civil nuclear pact with the US.
- Interest in the project was rekindled in 2013 after Iran and the US, UK, France, Russia, China and Germany reached an interim agreement on Tehran's nuclear programme and some sanctions were lifted.

1. Missiles: Everything you wanted to know

What is a missile?

- A missile is essentially a sophisticated bomb. Once released, a bomb is governed by the laws of ballistics, which means only the force of gravity acts upon it.
- By attaching a propulsion system, it can be made more accurate and faster. A bomb with a propulsion system is called a rocket. If guided and controlled, a rocket can be made deadlier, and that is what a missile is.
- Missiles are classified variously based on the launching system. Thus, missiles can be surface-to-surface (SSM), air-to-surface (ASM), air-to-air, etc.
- Based on the working principle, missiles can be ballistic or cruise and classified by range and proposed use, strategic or tactical.
- Key to modern warfare, missiles can carry tons of nuclear warheads at speeds way higher than fighter planes.

How is a ballistic missile different from a cruise one?

- A ballistic missile is used to hit a predetermined target —launched such that it burns most of its fuel to attain the desired velocity in the first phase, also called the boost phase. Such a missile can only be guided during the powered phase of flight. Easy to detect, but it's almost impossible to intercept it.
- A cruise missile is a small pilotless craft that carries an explosive warhead. It has wings and an engine, but is built more economically. It is steered by inertial navigation system (INS), that's also used by airplanes.
- A cruise missile can be made so accurate that it can be aimed at any specific place like a door or a window. Its flight can be guided for a longer period.

India's ballistic and cruise missiles:

- India's Agni and Prithvi are ballistic missile systems while BrahMos is a cruise missile system.
- Overall 31 countries have operational ballistic missile systems. China has the highest number of different systems, while the US has four.

What are strategic and tactical missiles?

- Ballistic missiles are categorised according to their range, which is the maximum distance along the surface of the earth from the point of launch to the point of impact of its payload.
- Until recently, Russia, US, China, the UK, France and Israel were the only countries with operational ICBM technology.
- With Hwasong-15, North Korea's joined this club. With over 5,000-km range, India's Agni-V also qualifies for this club.

Ballistic missiles club:

- China 19
- Russia 16
- Iran 11
- India 6

2. Border Protection Grid to be set up in Border States

What is the issue?

- Union Home Minister in a meeting with the Chief Ministers of the Indo-Bangladesh Border (IBB) States emphasized on the need for securing the country's borders and putting in place the systems to facilitate legitimate trade and commerce.

What is Border Protection Grid?

- Concept of Border Protection Grid (BPG) is vital for multi-pronged and foolproof mechanism to secure our border.
- The grid will comprise of various elements namely physical barriers, non-physical barriers, surveillance system, Intelligence agencies, State Police, BSF and other State and Central agencies.

- BPG will be supervised by a State level Standing Committee under the Chairmanship of respective Chief Secretaries.
- BPG will ensure greater help for the States in the overall border security.

About infrastructure along the Indo-Bangladesh border:

- The Indo-Bangladesh Border covers 5 states of India including Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and West Bengal is 4096 km long.
- So far in 3006 km border security infrastructure of fence, roads, floodlights and border out posts (BOPs) are in place and works in the remaining 1090 km are yet to be started.
- Out of this, 684 km will be secured with fence and the related infrastructure, and the balance 406 km with the non-physical barriers.
- Although bulk of the infrastructure is in place or under construction, construction in some parts is yet to commence mainly due to land acquisition issues.

1. Exercise Ajeya Warrior 2017

- Joint Indo UK army training exercise
- Objective is to build and promote bilateral army to army coordination and promote interoperability.
- Conducted at Bikaner Rajasthan

2. 'Clean Sea-2017' exercise at sea off Port Blair

- The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) conducted the regional level marine oil pollution response exercise 'Clean Sea-2017'.
- It was held at sea off Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

3. Global Entrepreneurship Summit

- Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES) 2017 was held in Hyderabad from 28th – 30th November 2017.
- GES 2017 was hosted by NITI Aayog in partnership with Government of the United States of America.
- It is the annual entrepreneurship gathering which serves as meeting point for emerging entrepreneurs and investors from around the world. Theme of GES 2017 was "Women First, Prosperity for All".

4. Floating Solar Power Plant in Kerala

- The largest-ever floating solar power plant in India has become operational in Kerala.
- Constructed by Ad tech Systems, the plant will generate 7 lakh units of power in a year.
- The unique feature of this plant is the anchoring mechanism used by the overwhelming technology to maintain the plant with the alteration of the water level.