

1. GOVT APPROVES CONSTRUCTION OF ZOJI LA TUNNEL

India approved a strategic road transport project to boost all-weather connectivity between key sectors of Srinagar, Kargil and Leh in a bid to better secure its borders in Jammu and Kashmir.

- ❑ The cabinet committee on economic affairs (CCEA) approved the construction, operation and maintenance of the two-lane, bi-directional Zoji La tunnel in engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) mode.
- ❑ The new project will provide year-round access to the Leh region, which gets cut off due to bad weather in winter, allowing Indian security forces to check infiltration and stock up on crucial supplies and ammunition.
- ❑ The project will be implemented by the ministry of road transport and highways through the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corp. Ltd.
- ❑ The project has strategic and socioeconomic importance and shall be an instrument for the development of the economically backward districts in Jammu & Kashmir. The move will also boost tourism in the region and, in turn, improve the local economy.

2. FIRST 'BLUE MOON' TOTAL ECLIPSE IN 150 YEARS

- ❑ A rare total lunar eclipse that involves the second full moon of the month — popularly referred to as a Blue Moon — is set to take place on January 31 for the first time in over 150 years.
- ❑ This will be the first eclipse of 2018. For some parts of Asia, including India, the eclipse will already be under way as the moon rises.
- ❑ Central and eastern Asia, Indonesia, New Zealand and most of Australia will get a fine view of the Blue Moon.
- ❑ Alaska, Hawaii and northwestern Canada will see the eclipse from start to finish. Moonset will intervene for the rest of North and Central America.

3. LAND BORDER CROSSING

The Union cabinet approved the agreement between India and Myanmar on land border crossing.

- ❑ The agreement will facilitate regulation and harmonization of existing free movement rights for people residing in the border areas of both the countries.
- ❑ It will also facilitate movement of people on the basis of valid passports and visas which will enhance economic and social interaction between the two countries.

4. CONSULTATION PAPER ON TELECOM POLICY

- ❑ The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has issued a consultation paper seeking comments on structure and contents of the policy document, apart from other issues deemed to be important for growth of the telecom sector.
- ❑ The objectives of the new telecom policy include achieving the target of 900 million broadband connections with a minimum download speed of 2 Mbps; establishing 10 million public Wi-Fi hotspots across the country; attaining average speed of 20 Mbps for wireless internet connectivity; and placing India among top-50 nations in global rankings of network readiness, communications systems, and services. Apart from this, the objectives also call for enabling of access for connecting 10 billion Internet-of-Things (IoT) and Machine-to-Machine (M2M) sensors and devices while attracting \$100 billion investment in the communications sector.

5. CENTRE TABLES AMENDED OBC BILL IN LOK SABHA

- ❑ The Rajya Sabha had proposed the amendments in the last session to the bill which proposes constitutional status for the OBC commission.
- ❑ Tabling the bill, the government said it seeks to reject the amendments inserted in the original bill by the Rajya Sabha. The bill also says that the proposed National Commission for Backward Classes will give its report concerning a state to the state government and not to the Governor as said in the original bill passed by the Lok Sabha in the Monsoon Session.
- ❑ The government said that while it had agreed to make provision in the rules to include a woman in the commission, there was no need for a quota for minority communities as a Minority Commission already exists.

6. NALBANA BIRD SANCTUARY AND CHILIKA LAKE

- ❑ Nalbana Bird Sanctuary or Nalbana Island is the core area of the Ramsar designated wetlands of Chilika Lake. It was declared a bird sanctuary under the Wildlife Protection Act in 1973. In the heart of the park, one can see thousands of birds descending during the migratory season. The island disappears during monsoon season due to inundation only to emerge again in post-monsoon.
- ❑ Chilika Lake is a brackish water lagoon on the east coast of India, at the mouth of the Daya River, flowing into the Bay of Bengal, covering an area of over 1,100 km². It is the largest coastal lagoon in India and the second largest coastal lagoon in the world. Chilika Lake was designated the first Indian wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. The Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) is the flagship species of Chilika lake. Chilika is home to the only known population of Irrawaddy dolphins in India and one of only two lagoons in the world that are home to this species. It is classified as Vulnerable, in five of the six other places it is known to live.

7.GOV. NOD FOR REVISED PPP PORT CONCESSIONS

The government approved a revised model concession pact for projects based on public private partnership (PPP) design at major ports to make the investment climate more investor friendly.

- ❑ The revised Model Concession Agreement (MCA) includes providing an exit route to developers by way of divesting their equity up to 100% after completion of two years from the Commercial Operation Date (COD), similar to the MCA provisions of the highways sector.
- ❑ The amendments in the MCA envisage constitution of the Society for Affordable Redressal of Disputes - Ports (**SAROD- PORTS**) as a disputes resolution mechanism similar to the provision available in the highways sector. The government said under provision of additional land to the concessionaire, land rent had been reduced from 200% to 120% of the applicable scale of rates for the proposed additional land. Concessionaire would pay royalty on “per MT of cargo/TEU handled” basis, which would be indexed to the variations in the WPI annually. This would replace the present procedure of charging royalty which is equal to the percentage of gross revenue, quoted during bidding, calculated on the basis of upfront normative tariff ceiling prescribed by Tariff Authority for Major Ports (TAMP).
- ❑ This would help to resolve the long-pending grievances of public private participation (PPP) operators that revenue share was payable on ceiling tariff and price discounts are ignored. The problems associated with fixing storage charges by TAMP and collection of revenue share on storage charges, which had plagued many projects, would also get eliminated.

8.NITI AAYOG WORKING TO ADOPT AI, BLOCKCHAIN

The Niti Aayog is working towards adoption of frontier technologies such artificial intelligence and blockchain in the areas of governance. The government think-tank believes that such technologies will result in significant benefits if deployed in the areas of education and health, among others.

- ❑ The think tank said it is at an advanced stage on developing a National Data and Analytics Portal. Apart from being a single point source of sectoral data for researchers, policymakers and citizens, this portal will enable training dataset sharing between different organisations for AI applications. This platform will facilitate a policy support system through accurate sourcing, storing, analysing and presentation of data in a usable and visually appealing manner.
- ❑ NDAP platform will meet internationally accepted standards for safeguarding the privacy of individuals and entities and ensuring the security of data, systems and platforms. The sourcing of data will be from the Ministries and Departments of the Government of India, State Governments, and the agencies and organisations under the administrative control of such Ministries and Departments. The NDAP will be accessible to all individuals and public and private entities.

9.NO SPIKE MISSILE

- ❑ India has called off an order to buy **Spike anti-tank guided missiles** from Israel’s state-owned defence contractor Rafael.
- ❑ Spike is an Israeli fourth generation man-portable fire-and-forget anti-tank guided missile and anti-personnel missile with a tandem-charge HEAT warhead, developed and designed by the Israeli company Rafael Advanced Defense Systems.

10.SCIENTISTS IDENTIFY FOUR NEW BALSAM SPECIES

- ❑ Throwing fresh light on the uncharted biodiversity in India's north-eastern region, researchers have reported the discovery of four new species of balsam from various locations in Arunachal Pradesh.
- ❑ Commonly known as jewel weeds because of the diverse colour of the flowers, balsams are distributed throughout the Eastern Himalayas and the Western Ghats, Sri Lanka, South East Asia, Africa and Madagascar. The genus is scientifically named as *Impatiens*, signifying the impatient nature of the fruits which explode suddenly when touched.
- ❑ The species is characterised by small pure yellow flowers and hairy leaves. *Impatiens pseudocitrina*, discovered from Anjaw district, sports bright yellow flowers with small red spots on the throat and a long spur at the back. The species name denotes the similarities with *I. citrina*. A magnificent species discovered from the Lower Dibang valley, *Impatiens nilalohitae* grows to a height of more than one metre and has dark purple flowers with pale yellow throat and green stalk. Another spectacular balsam, *I.roingensis*, was found growing in Roing and Upper Siang. The plant has clustered white flowers with yellow patch on the mouth and hooked spur.
- ❑ Road widening works, deforestation and other development activities are posing a threat to the natural habitat of the new species.
- ❑ The researchers have also reported the rediscovery of another species *I. agastyamalayensis* from the Western Ghats after a gap of more than a century. Earlier this year; scientists had reported the discovery of *Impatiens arunachalensis*, a critically endangered species, from the Upper Siang district. Another balsam species *Impatiens walongensis* has been reported from Anjaw district.