Monthly Policy Review

February 2018

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GDP grows at 7.2% in the third quarter of 2017-18 (p. 2)
The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (at constant prices) of the country grew at 7.2% in the third quarter of 2017-18. This was higher than the 6.5% growth recorded in the previous quarter.

Cabinet approves methodology for auction of coal mines (p. 4)
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Cabinet approves Bill on trafficking of persons (p. 5)
The Bill aims to ensure protection of women and children. It seeks to address the issue of trafficking with a view to ensure prevention, rescue, and rehabilitation of trafficked persons.

Creation of National Urban Housing Fund worth Rs 60,000 crore approved (p. 6)
Union Cabinet has approved the creation of a National Urban Housing Fund for Rs 60,000 crore to ensure that the flow of central assistance under PMAY-Urban is sustained.

Standing Committee report on the RTE (Second Amendment) Bill, 2017 released (p. 7)
The Bill revisits the no-detention provision under the RTE Act, 2009 which prohibits detention of children until the completion of class eight. The Standing Committee endorses the Bill in its current form.

Cabinet approves amendments to MSME Development Act 2006 (p. 11)
The Union Cabinet approved amending the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 to change the basis of classification of enterprises from investment in plant machinery to annual turnover.

Draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2017 released (p. 9)
The draft Bill seeks to regulate the import, manufacture, export, storage, sale, transport, distribution, quality and use of pesticides. The Bill sets up a Central Pesticides Board to advise and regulate matters related to pesticides.

Defence Acquisition Council clears procurement proposals worth Rs 17,785 crore (p. 9)
The proposals approved the purchase of light machine guns, assault rifles, and sniper rifles worth Rs 15,935 crore, and purchase of military hardware (combat vehicles and a survey training vessel) worth over Rs 1,850 crore.

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PRS Legislative Research ▪ Institute for Policy Research Studies
3rd Floor, Gandharva Mahavidyalaya ▪ 212, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Marg ▪ New Delhi – 110002
Tel: (011) 43434035-36, 23234801-02 ▪ www.prsindia.org

Union Budget 2018-19

Vatsal Khullar (vatsal@prsindia.org)

Union Budget 2018-19 presented

The Union Finance Minister, Mr. Arun Jaitley, presented the Union Budget for 2018-19 on February 1, 2018.[1] Key highlights include:

- The government proposes to spend Rs 24,42,213 crore in 2018-19, which is 10.1% higher than the revised estimates of 2017-18.
- The receipts (other than net borrowings) are expected to increase by 12% to Rs 18,17,937 crore, owing to higher estimated revenue from the GST and income tax.
- A nominal GDP growth rate of 11.5% has been assumed for 2018-19. Fiscal deficit (indicating the borrowings for the government) is targeted at 3.3% of GDP (compared to 3.5% in 2017-18). Revenue deficit is targeted at 2.2% of GDP (compared to 2.6% in 2017-18).

Table 1: Budget 2018-19 (Rs Crore)

Item	Revised 2017-18	Budgeted 2018-19	% change
Total Expenditure	**22,17,750**	**24,42,213**	10.1%
Total Receipts (without borrowings)	**16,22,901**	**18,17,937**	12.0%
Fiscal Deficit	5,94,849	6,24,276	4.9%
% of GDP	**3.5%**	**3.3%**	
Revenue Deficit	4,38,877	4,16,034	-5.2%
% of GDP	**2.6%**	**2.2%**	

Sources: Union Budget 2018-19; PRS.

Key policy proposals in the budget speech are:

- **Health:** The National Health Protection Scheme will be launched to cover over 10 crore poor families, with a coverage of up to Rs five lakh per family per year.
- **Long-term capital gains:** Currently, long term capital gains from transfer of equity shares or a unit of an equity oriented fund or a unit of business trust is exempt from payment of income tax. These transfers will now be taxed at 10%, if the profit from the transaction exceeds one lakh rupees. For computing long term capital gains, the purchase price would be considered as the higher of the actual purchase price or the price as on January 31, 2018.
- **FRBM Act:** The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003 (FRBM Act) is being amended based on the recommendations of the Fiscal Reform and Budget Management Committee (Chair: Mr. N. K. Singh). The amendments include bringing down the central government's debt to GDP ratio to 40% and setting an operational target for fiscal deficit at 3% of GDP. The target for debt to GDP ratio will have to be achieved by 2025. Further, the deadline for achieving the operational target for fiscal deficit has been extended from 2018 to 2021.

The major tax changes announced are:

- **Income tax:** For salaried individuals, a standard tax deduction of Rs 40,000 has been introduced. The deduction for transport allowance and medical reimbursements has been removed.
- **Education cess:** The 3% Education Cess has been replaced by a 4% Health and Education Cess for non-resident persons, including foreign companies.
- **Corporation tax:** Currently, companies with annual turnover of less than Rs 50 crore pay corporate income tax at the rate of 25%. The threshold has now been increased to Rs 250 crores.
- **Deductions for farm producer companies:** Tax deduction of 100% has been introduced for farm producer companies with a total turnover of Rs 100 crores. The benefit will be available for a period of five years starting from 2018-19.
- **Road and Infrastructure Cess:** The existing Road Cess has been renamed to Road and *Infrastructure* Cess. This cess on petrol and diesel has been increased by Rs 2/litre, while the excise and customs duty have been cut by the same amount. As the cess is not part of the pool of funds shared with states, this move implies that the devolution of taxes to states will be reduced by Rs 11,865 crore.

A PRS summary of FRBM Committee Report is available here.

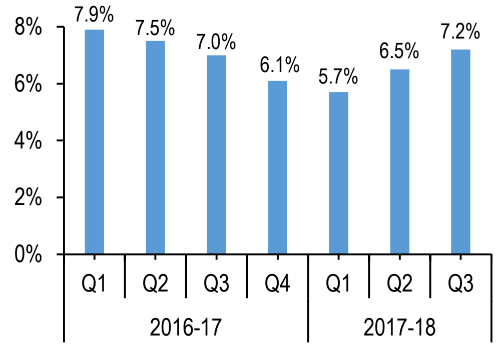
Macroeconomic Development

Roopal Suhag (roopal@prsindia.org))

GDP grows at 7.2% in the third quarter of 2017-18

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (at constant prices) of the country grew at 7.2% in the third quarter of 2017-18, over the corresponding period a year ago.[2] This was higher than the 6.5% growth in the second quarter of 2017-18. However, the year-on-year growth may be exaggerated in this quarter and the next as the base periods (the corresponding quarters a year ago) were affected by demonetisation. The quarterly trend is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: GDP growth (in %, year-on-year)



Sources: MOSPI; PRS.

GDP growth across economic sectors is measured in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA). GVA growth of the country was at 6.7% in the third quarter of 2017-18. Construction and services saw an increase in growth (year-on-year). Agriculture, mining, and electricity saw a decline in growth. Details on sectoral GVA growth are in Table 1.

Table 2: Gross Value Added across sectors in Q3 of 2017-18 (% growth year-on-year)

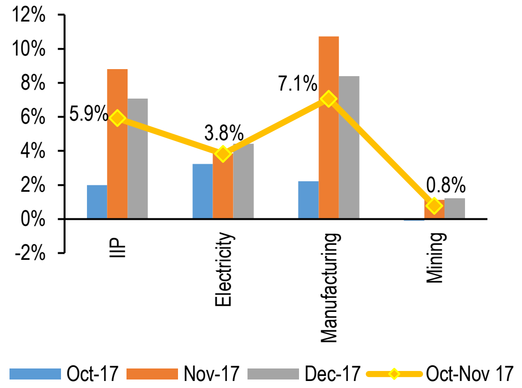
Sector	Q3 2016-17	Q2 2017-18	Q3 2017-18
Agriculture	7.5%	2.7%	4.1%
Mining	12.1%	7.1%	-0.1%
Manufacturing	8.1%	6.9%	8.1%
Electricity	9.5%	7.7%	6.1%
Construction	2.8%	2.8%	6.8%
Services	6.5%	7.1	7.7%
GVA	**6.9%**	**6.2%**	**6.7%**
GDP	**7.0%**	**6.5%**	**7.2%**

Note: GVA is GDP without taxes and subsidies, at basic prices (2011-12 base year).
Sources: MOSPI; PRS.

Industrial production grew by 6% in the third quarter of 2017-18

The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew by 5.9% in the third quarter (Oct-Dec) of 2017-18, as compared to the same period in 2016-17.[3] Manufacturing production saw the highest increase of 7.1% in this quarter, followed by an increase of 3.8% in electricity and 0.8% in mining. Figure 1 shows the change in industrial production in the third quarter of 2017-18, and the average for the quarter.

Figure 2: Growth in IIP in third quarter of 2017-18 (year-on-year)



Sources: MOSPI; PRS.

Policy repo rate kept unchanged at 6%

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) released the sixth Bi-Monthly Monetary Policy Statement of 2017-18.[4] The policy repo rate (at which RBI lends money to banks) was kept unchanged at 6% by a majority vote of the members. One member voted for a increase in the rate by 0.25%.[4] Other decisions of the MPC include:

- The reverse repo rate (the rate at which RBI borrows money from banks) was kept unchanged at 5.75%.
- The marginal standing facility rate (at which banks can borrow additional money) and bank rate (at which RBI buys or rediscounts bills of exchange) was also kept unchanged at 6.25%.

Finance

Vatsal Khullar (vatsal@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves the introduction of the Unregulated Deposit Schemes Bill, 2018

The Union Cabinet approved the introduction of the Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Bill, 2018 in Parliament.[5] In 2016, a draft Bill was released for public consultation.[6] Key features of the Bill include:

- The Bill bans deposit takers from promoting, operating, issuing advertisements, or accepting deposits in any unregulated deposit scheme.
- The Bill creates different offences for: (i) running an unregulated scheme, (ii) fraudulent default in regulated schemes, and (iii) wrongful inducement in relation to an unregulated scheme.

- The Bill contains provisions to repay depositors in cases where deposits have been taken illegally. It also provides for the attachment of properties to repay depositors.

For details on the draft Bill released in 2016, see the PRS Monthly Policy Review for November 2016 here.

Cabinet approves the introduction of the Chit Funds (Amendment) Bill, 2018

The Union Cabinet approved the introduction of the Chit Funds (Amendment) Bill, 2018 in Parliament.[5] The Bill seeks to amend the Chit Funds Act, 1982.[7] The 1982 Act regulates chit funds, and prohibits a fund from being created without the prior sanction of the state government. Under a chit fund, people agree to pay a certain amount from time to time into a fund. Periodically, one of the subscribers is chosen by drawing a chit to receive the prize amount from the fund. Key features of the Bill approved by the Cabinet are:

- The Bill seeks to use the words 'Fraternity Fund' under the 1982 Act for a chit business. This seeks to distinguish it from 'prize chits', which are banned under a separate law.
- The Act specifies that a chit will be drawn in the presence of at least two subscribers. The Bill seeks to allow these subscribers to join via video-conferencing.
- Under the Act, the 'foreman' is responsible for conducting the chit. He is entitled to a maximum commission of 5% of the chit amount. The Bill seeks to increase the commission to 7%.

RBI working group submits report on FinTech and Digital Banking

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Inter-Regulatory Working Group on FinTech and Digital Banking (Chair: Mr. Sudarshan Sen, Executive Director, RBI) submitted its report.[8] The Group was constituted in July 2016 to study regulatory issues related to financial technology (FinTech) and digital banking.[9] It had representatives from regulators including SEBI, IRDA, and PFRDA. Key recommendations of the Group include:

- A framework may be introduced for a regulatory sandbox or innovation hub. Under the framework, regulators will provide regulatory support to innovators. This will allow innovators to experiment with their banking or payment solutions.
- The Group recommended that there is a need for a data protection and privacy law to be enacted in the country.
- Upon the release of a securities market FinTech product, regulators may assess the product and decide whether it can be monitored: (i) by registering it as an intermediary, or (ii) through regulations.
- Since FinTech companies are growing at a fast pace, the government may consider introducing tax subsidies for merchants accepting a certain proportion of their revenues through digital payments.
- The requirement of increasing awareness for new technological innovations and digital payments among customers should be highlighted by all market regulators.

Coal and Mining

Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves methodology for auction of coal mines

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the methodology for auction of coal mines/blocks for sale of coal under the Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015 and the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957.[10] The Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015 was passed in March 2015 to allocate the 204 mines that had been cancelled by the Supreme Court due to arbitrary allocation. The 2015 Act provided for the allocation of coal mines by way of auction and allotment and subsequent sale of such coal.

The approved auction methodology will be an ascending forward auction, i.e., the prospective buyers bid progressively higher prices until no one is willing to match the winner's bid. The bid parameter will be the price offer in Rs/tonne which will be paid to the state government on the actual production of coal. There will be no restriction on the sale and/or utilisation of coal from the coal mine.

Women and Child Development

Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves the introduction of an anti-trafficking Bill

The Union Cabinet approved the introduction of the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018.[11] The Bill contains provisions to ensure prevention, rescue, and rehabilitation of trafficked persons. Key features of the Bill are:

- **Forms of trafficking covered:** The Bill seeks to cover aggravated forms of trafficking including trafficking for the purpose of: (i) forced labour, (ii) begging, and (iii) marriage.
- **Confidentiality:** The Bill seeks to ensure confidentiality of: (i) victims, witnesses, and complainants by not disclosing their identity, and (ii) victims by recording their statements through video conferencing.
- **Time-bound trial:** The Bill seeks to complete trial as well as securing return of the victims within one year from taking up the matter. Special courts will be designated in each district for speedy trial of matters.
- **Rehabilitation of victims:** The Bill seeks to extend relief to rescued victims to address their physical and mental trauma. Rehabilitation of victims will not be dependent upon initiating criminal proceedings against the accused.
- **Rehabilitation fund:** The Bill seeks to create a rehabilitation fund to be used for the physical, psychological and social well-being of the victim. This will include education, skill development, health care, and legal aid.
- **Institutional support:** Nodal agencies will be created at the district, state and central level. These will be responsible for prevention, protection, investigation, and rehabilitation work. The National Investigation Agency will perform the tasks of the Anti-Trafficking Bureau at the national level.
- **Punishment:** Punishment for trafficking will range from a minimum rigorous imprisonment of 10 years to life imprisonment, along with a fine of at least Rs one lakh.

Water Resources

Roopal Suhag (roopal@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves setting up of tribunal to resolve Mahanadi water dispute

The Union Cabinet approved setting up of a tribunal to resolve the dispute between Odisha and Chhattisgarh over Mahanadi river water.[12] The tribunal will be constituted under the Inter-State Water Disputes Act, 1956, on the request of Odisha. The state has repeatedly sought the formation of a tribunal stating that negotiations have failed to resolve the dispute.

The tribunal will determine: (i) water sharing among basin states on the basis of the overall availability of water in the Mahanadi basin; (ii) the contribution of each state; (iii) the present utilisation of water resources in each state; and (iv) the potential for future development.

The tribunal shall consist of a Chairman and two other members nominated by the Chief Justice of India from amongst the judges of the Supreme Court or a High Court. The tribunal is required to submit its report and decision within a period of three years. In case of unavoidable reasons, this period can be extended to a maximum time limit of two years.

Supreme Court gives its judgement on the Cauvery Water Dispute

A three judge bench of the Supreme Court gave its judgement on the Cauvery water dispute.[13] The Cauvery water dispute between the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and the union territory of Puducherry was referred to the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal in 1990. The Tribunal gave its final judgement in 2007 and allocated the Cauvery basin water among Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry. The Supreme Court was hearing an appeal on this decision.

The Supreme court said that drinking water requirement has to be placed at a higher pedestal as a fundamental principle of equitable distribution. Keeping in mind the needs of Bengaluru for drinking and domestic water, an additional 4.75 TMC was awarded to Karnataka. The Court also ruled that 20 TMC of ground water in Tamil Nadu was not taken into account by the Tribunal, and allocated 10 TMC of this to Karnataka. Thus, the share of Karnataka was increased by 14.75 TMC and that of Tamil Nadu was reduced by the same amount.

Urban Development

Sanat Kanwar (sanat@prsindia.org))

Union Cabinet approved the creation of a National Urban Housing Fund

The Union Cabinet has approved the creation of a National Urban Housing Fund (NUHF) worth Rs 60,000 crore.[14] This fund will be under the Building Materials and Technology Promotion Council, an autonomous body set up in 1990 under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. The council undertakes research to facilitate large scale application of new building material technologies.[15] The NUHF aims to raise funds in the next four years to ensure a sustained flow of central release under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)-Urban, enabling construction of houses.

PMAY- Urban is a housing scheme being implemented from 2015 to 2022. The scheme comprises of four components: (i) in situ rehabilitation of existing slum dwellers through private participation, (ii) credit linked subsidy scheme (CLSS) for economically weaker section (EWS), lower income group (LIG), and middle income group (MIG), (iii) affordable housing in partnership, and (iv) subsidy for beneficiary-led individual house construction.

Transport

Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves amendments to the Major Port Authorities Bill, 2016

The Union Cabinet approved certain amendments to the Major Port Authorities Bill, 2016.[16] The Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha on December 16, 2016.[17] The Bill repeals the Major Port Trusts Act, 1963, and seeks to provide greater autonomy and flexibility to Major Ports. The Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture had submitted its report on the Bill on July 18, 2017.[18] The proposed amendments seek to address the recommendations of the Standing Committee. Key amendments proposed include:

- **Composition of the Board:** The number of labour representatives to be appointed in the Port Authority Board among the serving employees of the Port will be increased from one to two. Members representing the interest of the employees will hold office for a term of three years. Further, they will not hold office for more than two consecutive terms. The minimum number of independent members on the Board has been reduced from three to two.
- **Function of the Board:** The Board of each Major Port will be entitled to create a specific master plan for any development or infrastructure within the port limits and in the land belonging to it. Such master plans will be independent of any local or state government regulations.
- **Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects:** With regard to PPP projects, the concessionaire can fix the tariff (for any services) based on market conditions. Under the Bill, for such projects, the Board may only fix the tariff for initial bidding.
- **Adjudicatory Board:** Under the Bill, the Adjudicatory Board consists of a Presiding Officer and two members, as appointed by the central government. The amendments propose that the Presiding Officer and the members be appointed by the central government on the recommendations of the selection committee.

Law and Justice

Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

Amendment to Companies Act, 2013

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs passed an order to remove certain difficulties in the implementation of the Companies Act, 2013.[19]

Under the Act, any director may be removed by passing an ordinary resolution (more than 50% votes). The Order amends this provision to create an exception for independent directors.

As per the Act, an independent director can be appointed for a second term only by passing a special resolution (at least 75% of the votes). A re-appointed independent director may be removed by an ordinary resolution.

The Ministry passed the Order to align the type of resolution required for removal of a director with that for appointment. Any independent director re-appointed under the Act for a second term can now be removed only by passing a special resolution (75% votes needed), after giving the director the opportunity to be heard.

Education

Nivedita Rao (nivedita@prsindia.org)

Standing Committee submits report on RTE (Second Amendment) Bill, 2017

The Standing Committee on Human Resource Development (Chair: Dr. Satyanarayan Jatiya) submitted its report on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Second Amendment) Bill, 2017.[20]

The Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha on August 11, 2017.[21] It was referred to the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development on August 22, 2017. The Right to Education Act, 2009 prohibits detention of children till they complete elementary education i.e., class 8. The Bill amends this provision to state that a regular examination will be held in class 5 and class 8 at the end of every academic year. If a child fails the exam, he will be given additional instruction, and take a re-examination. If he fails in the re-examination, the relevant central or state government may decide to allow schools to detain the child. Key recommendations from the Report are as follows:

- **Reinstating examinations:** The Committee observed low learning levels among school children. It noted that with the no detention policy there is no pressure on the children to learn and on the teachers to teach. Therefore, there is a need for policy change so as to improve the learning of children at elementary stage of education (classes 1 to 8). In this context, the Committee upholds the Bill's provision which states that learning of children must be assessed through examinations in classes 5 and 8 at the end of every academic year.
- **Flexibility of states:** The Committee supported the Bill's provision wherein states have the discretion to detain or not to detain. If they choose to detain, they can do so in class 5 or 8 or in both classes. The Committee explained that as there are diversities amongst states it would be appropriate that they are allowed to take a decision as per their circumstances and needs. With the discretion with the states, there is a possibility that they make different rules under this provision which might have repercussions on the uniformity of elementary education system results. In this context, the Committee recommended that common guidelines may also be issued to all states with respect to detention of a child.

For a PRS Summary of the Report, see here.

UGC constitutes an Expert Committee for examining Institutions of Eminence

The University Grants Commission (UGC) (Institutions of Eminence Deemed to be Universities) Regulations, 2017 and UGC (Declaration of Government Educational Institutions as Institutions of Eminence) Guidelines, 2017 received the approval of the central government.[22] The aim of these Regulations and Guidelines is to provide the regulatory architecture to 10 public and 10 private higher educational institutions to emerge as world-class teaching and research institutions, i.e., Institutions of Eminence. These Regulations and Guidelines mandated the setting up of an Empowered Expert Committee. As per the Regulations, the UGC has constituted this Committee.[23] The functions of this Committee include: (i) giving recommendations to the Ministry of Human Resource Development for selection of institutions as Institutions of Eminence, (ii) reviewing the Institutions of Eminence once in three years for adherence to their implementation plans, (iii) suggesting remedial action to address deficiencies following the review, and (iv) determining penalties in case Institutions are unable to meet their goals.

Cabinet approved the implementation of 'Prime Minister Research Fellows'

The Union Cabinet approved the implementation of the 'Prime Minister's Research Fellows' scheme.[24] The scheme was announced in the Budget Speech 2018-19. Under this scheme, the best students who have completed or are in the final year of B. Tech or Integrated M.Tech or M.Sc. in science and technology streams from IISc/IITs/NITs/IISERs/IIITs will be offered direct admission in PhD programme in the IITs/IISc.

It is estimated to cost Rs 1,650 crore over a period of seven years beginning 2018-19. A maximum of 3,000 Fellows would be selected in a three year period, beginning 2018-19.

Students who fulfil the eligibility criteria, and shortlisted through a selection process will be offered a fellowship of: Rs 70,000 per month for the first two years, Rs 75,000 per month for the third year, and Rs 80,000 per month in the fourth and fifth years. Apart from this, a research grant of Rs two lakh will be provided to each of the Fellows for a period of five years to cover their foreign travel expenses for presenting research papers in international conferences and seminars.

UGC releases regulations on autonomous colleges

The University Grants Commission (Conferment of Autonomous Status Upon Colleges and Measures for Maintenance of Standards in Autonomous Colleges) Regulations, 2018 have been released.[25] These Regulations will apply to all colleges which are affiliated to, or are constituent colleges of universities seeking the 'Autonomous College' status. Key features of the Regulations include:

- **Criteria for granting autonomy:** The criteria for granting the status of an 'Autonomous College' include: (i) academic reputation and previous performance in university examinations and its co-curricular activities in the past, (ii) research achievements of the faculty, (iii) adequacy of infrastructure in terms of class rooms, library books, laboratories, among others, and (iv) financial strength of the institution.
- **Terms and conditions of an 'Autonomous College':** The Regulations specify the terms and conditions of functioning as 'Autonomous Colleges', they include: (i) reviewing existing courses and prescribing its own courses of study and syllabi, (ii) evolving methods of assessment of students performance, conduct of examinations, and notification of results, (iii) fixing fees of the courses at their own level, and (iv) constituting their own Governing Body, Academic Council, Board of Studies, and Finance Committee.
- **Starting new courses:** An 'Autonomous College' can start diploma (undergraduate and postgraduate) or certificate courses without prior approval of the University it is affiliated to. The college can also start a new degree or postgraduate course/Ph.D. with the approval of the Academic Council of the college and concerned statutory council(s), wherever required.

UGC releases (Categorisation of Universities (only) for Grant of Graded Autonomy) Regulations, 2018

The University Grants Commission (UGC) (Categorisation of Universities (only) for Grant of Graded Autonomy) Regulations, 2018 have been released.[26] As per these regulations, the UGC will categorise universities into three categories based on various parameters. Depending on the category of the university, there would be a certain extent of autonomy for the universities on aspects including: (i) starting a new course, (ii) opening constituent units/off-campus centres, (iii) hiring foreign faculty, and (iv) admitting students of foreign nationalities.

The Commission will fix dates (at least two times in a year) by which an institution will submit a request in a prescribed format for categorisation. Such applications will be scrutinised by the UGC and orders will be passed within 30 days from the last date specified for the receipt of such applications.

Health

Nivedita Rao (nivedita@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves closure of two autonomous bodies under Health Ministry

The Union Cabinet approved the proposal for closure of two Autonomous Bodies, namely, Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi (RAN) and Jansankhya Sthirata Kosh (JSK).[27] The functions of these bodies are proposed to be subsumed under the Department of Health and Family Welfare. The time frame for its implementation is one year.

The RAN was set up as a registered society to provide financial medical assistance to poor patients receiving treatment in designated central government hospitals. The JSK was set up with a corpus grant of Rs 100 crores in 2003 to raise awareness for population stabilisation strategies. JSK organises various activities with target populations as a part of its mandate.

NITI Aayog had undertaken a review of the 19 Autonomous Bodies (under the Department of Health and Family Welfare) that have been formed under Societies Registration Act, 1860. The government stated a need for such Bodies to be reviewed and rationalised to improve their outcomes. The review by NITI Aayog had recommended closure of RAN and JSK and their functions to be vested in the Ministry.

Cabinet approves a scheme for increasing human resources for health and medical education

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, approved the continuation and implementation of additional phases of Human Resources for Health and Medical Education schemes.[28] This measure is aimed to increase the availability of health professionals, check the existing geographical distribution of medical colleges, and promote affordable medical education.

It is estimated to cost Rs 14,931 crore up to 2019-20. The features of this scheme include: (i) continuation of ongoing scheme to establish 58 new medical colleges attached with existing District/Referral hospitals (already approved) by 2019-20, (ii) selection and establishment of 24 new medical colleges attached with existing District/ Referral hospitals by 2021-22, (iii) continuation of scheme for upgradation of existing government medical colleges resulting in an increase of 10,000 undergraduate seats and 8,058 post graduate seats by 2020-21, and (iv) completion of scheme for setting up of 112 Auxiliary Nursing and Midwifery schools and 136 General Nursing Midwifery schools by 2019-20 in under-served districts of the country.

Defence

Roopal Suhag (roopal@prsindia.org)

Defence Acquisition Council clears two procurement proposals

The Defence Acquisition Council (Chair: Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman) cleared two capital acquisition proposals worth Rs 17,785 crore.[29,30]

The first acquisition proposal approved the purchase of light machine guns, assault rifles, and sniper rifles worth Rs 15,935 crore. Details of this proposal are:

- Procurement of light machine guns for the three services (Army, Air Force, and Navy) at an estimated cost of over Rs 1,819 crore;
- Procurement of 7.4 lakh assault rifles at an estimated cost of Rs 12,280 crore. These rifles will be made under the 'Buy and Make (India)' category. Projects under this category should be indigenously designed and developed, with a minimum of 50% indigenous content;[31]
- Procurement of 5,719 sniper rifles for the Army and Air Force at an estimated cost of Rs 982 crore. These rifles will be made under the 'Buy Global' category. Projects under this category are purchased from foreign and domestic vendors; and
- Procurement of Advanced Torpedo Decoy Systems (ATDS) for the Navy at an estimated cost of Rs 850 crore. ATDS is expected to enhance the anti-submarine warfare capabilities of Naval ships.

The second acquisition proposal approved the purchase of military hardware worth over Rs 1,850 crore. Details of this proposal are:

- Procurement of combat vehicles at an estimated cost of over Rs 1,125 crore from the Ordnance Factory Board; and
- Procurement of a survey training vessel for the Indian Navy's growing hydro-graphic survey needs in ports, harbours, and exclusive economic zones. The vessel will be made domestically by Indian shipyards at an estimated cost of Rs 626 crore.

Agriculture

Sai Priya Kodidala (saipriya@prsindia.org)

Draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2017 released

The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare released a draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2017.[32] The draft Bill seeks to regulate import, manufacture, export, storage, sale, transport, distribution, quality and use of pesticides. It repeals the Insecticides Act, 1968. Key features of the draft Bill include:

- **Central Pesticides Board:** The Bill provides for setting up of a Central Pesticides Board to advise central and state governments on matters including (i) prevention of risk to human beings, animals, and environment due to pesticides, (ii) monitoring performance of registered pesticides in improving agricultural production, (iii) specifying protocols and procedures for manufacturing pesticides, and (iv) guidelines for regulation of advertising of pesticides in the media.
- **Composition of the Board:** The Board includes 40 members: (i) 10 ex-officio government officials including the Director General of Health Services (Chairman of the Board), (ii) 18 representatives of various government ministries, departments and institutions, and (iii) 12 nominated members by the central government including a pharmacologist, ecologist, medical toxicologist, and two farmers.
- **Registration Committee:** The Bill provides for constituting a Registration Committee which will: (i) register pesticides, (ii) allow or restrict use of pesticides, and (iii) notify pesticides, among other functions.
- **Composition of the Committee:** The Committee constitutes the Chairperson and 10 ex-officio members from government ministries, departments and institutions such

as the Joint Drugs Controller General of India, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research.

- **Registration of pesticides:** Application to register a pesticide for import, manufacture or export must be made to the Registration Committee. No pesticide will be registered for import or manufacture unless tolerance limits are specified for its residues under the Food Safety and Security Act, 2006.

Note that the Pesticide Management Bill, 2008, which was introduced in Rajya Sabha in October 2008 is pending consideration of that House.

CCEA approved increase in government guarantees for Price Support Scheme

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved extension of government guarantees worth Rs 19,000 crore to banks providing credit to the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED).[33] NAFED procures pulses and oilseeds at Minimum Support Prices (MSP) under the Price Support Scheme. Further, government guarantees worth Rs 45 crore is extended to the Small Farmers Agri-Business Consortium to meet their existing liability and settling claims. These government guarantees are provided for a period of five years.

Second advance estimates of production of major crops for 2017-18 released

The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare released the second advanced estimates of production of major crops.[34] In 2017-18, the total food grain production (277.5 million tonnes) is estimated to increase by 0.7% as compared to the final estimates in 2016-17.[35] This growth in food grains production is due to 4.4% increase in pulses and 0.3% in cereals as shown in Table 3.

Among cereals, while production of rice and coarse cereals is estimated to increase, wheat production is estimated to decrease by 1.3% in 2017-18 as compared to 2016-17. Among pulses, gram production in 2017-18 is estimated to be 19% more than in 2016-17, while tur production is estimated to decrease by 15.9%.

Among commercial crops, oilseeds production in 2017-18 is estimated to be 6.9% less than the production in 2016-17. This is due to decrease in soybean production. In 2017-18, sugarcane production is estimated to increase by 15.2% as compared to 2016-17. Similarly, cotton production is estimated to grow at 2.5%.

Table 3: Second Advanced Estimates of major crops in 2017-18 (in million tonnes)

Crop	Final 2016-17	2nd Advance Estimates 2017-18	% change over final estimate
Food grains	**275.7**	**277.5**	**0.7%**
Cereals	252.7	253.5	0.3%
Rice	110.2	111.0	0.8%
Wheat	98.4	97.1	-1.3%
Maize	26.3	27.1	3.4%
Coarse Cereals	44.2	45.4	2.8%
Pulses	23.0	24.0	4.4%
Gram	9.3	11.1	19.0%
Tur	4.8	4.0	-15.9%
Oilseeds	**32.1**	**29.9**	**-6.9%**
Soybean	13.8	11.4	-17.5%
Groundnut	7.6	8.2	8.7%
Cotton #	33.1	33.9	2.5%
Sugarcane	306.7	353.2	15.2%

Million bales of 170 kgs each
Sources: Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, February 27, 2018; Directorate of Economics & Statistics; PRS.

Industry

Sai Priya Kodidala (saipriya@prsindia.org)

CCEA approves continuation of PMEGP for three years 2017-18 to 2019-20

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved continuation of the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) for three years (2017-18 to 2019-20).[36] Rs 5,500 crore has been approved for this purpose. The scheme was launched in 2008 and seeks to provide credit-linked subsidy for setting up of micro enterprises in non-farm sectors by traditional artisans and unemployment youth.

Draft National Auto Policy 2018 released

The Department of Heavy Industries released a draft National Auto Policy 2018.[37] The draft Policy seeks to provide a comprehensive plan for the development of the automotive industry in India. Key features include:

- **Emission standards:** The draft Policy recommended that a roadmap for reduction in CO_2 emissions through Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) regulations must be developed. It seeks to match CO_2 targets set by developed countries by 2025. It also recommended that a mechanism for banking and trading of emission credits must be implemented.

- **Research and development:** The draft Policy recommended that Technology Acquisition Fund can be set up to acquire technologies through licensing agreements, joint ventures, or acquisitions. Further, Public Private Partnership-based industry investments in research and development can be incentivised.
- **Green vehicles:** The draft Policy recommended that a minimum share of green vehicles (such as electric vehicles) must be mandated among new vehicles purchased by agencies from central and state governments, and municipal corporations.

Cabinet approves amendments to MSME Development Act 2006

The Union Cabinet approved change in basis of classifying Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).[38] The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 will be amended to change the basis of classification of enterprises from investment in plant machinery to annual turnover. The proposed turnover limits are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Proposed classification of enterprises by turnover limits

Enterprise	2006 Act investment limits		Proposed turnover limits
	Manufacturing	Services	
Micro	Rs 25 lakh	Rs 10 lakh	Rs five crore
Small	Rs 25 lakh to Rs 5 crore	Rs 10 lakh to Rs 2 crore	Rs five crore to Rs 75 crore
Medium	Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore	Rs 2 crore to Rs 5 crore	Rs 75 crore to Rs 250 crore

Sources: Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, February 7 2018; PRS.

Petroleum and Natural Gas

Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org)

Cabinet approves extension of the Discovered Small Field Policy

The Union Cabinet approved the extension of the Discovered Small Field Policy.[39] The extension will apply to the identified 60 discovered small fields/un-monetized discoveries for offer under the Discovered Small Field Policy Bid Round-II. This policy helps the development of smaller and marginal oil and gas fields which could not be developed due to isolated locations, small size, and prohibitive development costs.

Of these 60 fields, 22 belong to the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited, five belong to Oil India Limited, and 12 are relinquished from the New Exploration and Licensing Policy Blocks. The remaining 21 are fields from the bid round-I which were put on offer, but not awarded due to insufficient response from the investors.

These discoveries are estimated to have 194.65 million metric tonne of oil and oil equivalent gas in place. The Empowered Committee of Secretaries (ECS) comprising of Secretary (Petroleum and Natural Gas), Secretary (Expenditure) and Law Secretary will finalise and approve the Model Revenue Sharing Contract, Notice Inviting Offer, and other documents for this round of bidding. The award of contracts will be approved by the Ministers of Petroleum and Natural Gas and Finance based on the recommendations of the ECS.

Cabinet approves enhancement of target under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the enhancement of the target of Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) from five crore to eight crore with an additional allocation of Rs 4,800 crore.[40] The revised target will be achieved by 2020.

In addition to the households identified under the Socio Economic Caste Census, the scheme will cover all SC/ST households, beneficiaries of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin), and Antyoday Anna Yojana, and forest dwellers, among others.

PMUY seeks to safeguard the health of women and children by providing them with LPG as a clean cooking fuel. Under the scheme, cash assistance is provided to beneficiaries in order to obtain a deposit-free new LPG connection. So far, 3.35 crore connections have been released under the scheme.

Telecom

Sai Priya Kodidala (saipriya@prsindia.org)

TRAI releases Inputs on National Telecom Policy 2018

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) released Inputs on National Telecom Policy 2018.[41] It includes issues such as licensing framework, spectrum management, data centres, and research and development. Key objectives and strategies include:

- **Investments in the sector:** TRAI has set targets to attract USD 60 Billion by 2020 and USD 100 Billion by 2022. To increase investments, TRAI recommended that ease of doing business can be enhanced through simplification of licensing and regulatory frameworks, rationalization of taxes, levies and related compliances, and facilitating availability of resources including spectrum. It also recommended that communications systems and services can be recognised as essential connectivity infrastructure like roadways and airlines.
- **Access to broadband services:** TRAI targets to provide access to affordable broadband services to 90% of the population by 2022, with 900 million broadband subscriptions with a download speed of two Mbps. It recommended that provisions can be made in the Indian Telegraph Right of Way Rules, 2016 for establishment of common service ducts, utility corridors, and related infrastructure for underground telecom infrastructure.
- **Information and communications technologies:** TRAI targets to establish a policy framework for setting up of data centres. It recommended that an integrated policy framework for cyber and data security, connectivity, power, and related issues can be prescribed. Further, it recommended that laws for data privacy, protection, and security can be declared.

TRAI releases order on regulatory principles of tariff assessment'

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) released the Telecom Tariff (63rd Amendment) Order, 2018.[42] Key features of the Order include:

- **Non-discrimination:** A service provider must not discriminate between subscribers of the same class. Further, classification of subscribers must be based on clear criteria and not arbitrary.
- **Reporting Requirement:** A telecom service provider is required to report to TRAI regarding any new tariff plan for services within seven days of implementation. It also needs to ensure that the tariff is consistent with regulatory principles such as transparency, non-discrimination and non-predation.
- **Penalties**: In case a service provider fails to comply with the reporting requirement, it is liable to pay Rs 5,000 every day of delay (maximum of Rs two lakh). Further, if the tariff is found to be predatory, i.e the price is below the average variable cost with the intend to reduce competition, the service provider is liable to pay up to Rs 50 lakh per tariff plan per service area.
- Before imposing such penalties, the service provider must be given a reasonable opportunity to represent against the non-compliance of the tariff order.
- **Significant market provider:** TRAI can on its own examine the tariffs of a service provider which has at least 30% of the market share in a particular licensed service area, and disallow its tariffs if they are found to be predatory.

External Affairs

Vinayak Krishnan (vinayak@prsindia.org)

Prime Minister visits Palestine, United Arab Emirates, and Oman

Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi visited Palestine, United Arab Emirates, and Oman.[43] Details of these visits are as given below:

Palestine: India and Palestine signed six agreements. This includes agreements for: (i) setting up of India-Palestine super speciality hospital, (ii) construction of India-Palestine centre for empowering women, and (iii) setting up of a new National Printing Press at Ramallah, in Palestine.[44]

United Arab Emirates: Five agreements were signed between India and United Arab Emirates in various sectors including: (i) contractual employment of Indian workers, (ii) technical cooperation in rail sector, and (iii) enhancing cooperation in financial services industry.[45]

Oman: India and Oman signed eight agreements in various sectors including: (i) legal cooperation in civil and commercial matters, (ii) cooperation in health, (iii) cooperation in peaceful uses of outer space, (iv) cooperation in tourism, and (v) military cooperation.[46]

Heads of state of Iran and Canada visit India

The President of Iran and the Prime Minister of Canada visited India.[47,48] Key agreements signed with the countries are mentioned below

Iran: Iran and India signed nine agreements in various areas including: (i) avoidance of double taxation, (ii) cooperation in traditional fields of medicine, (iii) cooperation in agriculture (including credit cooperation, soil conservation, and post-harvest technology), and (iv) cooperation in health (including pooling of financial resources, as well as upgrading quality of training).[49]

Canada: Canada and India signed six agreements for cooperation in various sectors including: (i) electronics and IT, (ii) intellectual property rights, (iii) higher education, and (iv) science and technology.[50]

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