Monthly Policy Review

November 2017

Highlights of this Issue

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CCEA approves export of all types of pulses (p. 10)
The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the removal of the prohibition on export of all pulses. Further, the CCEA empowered a Committee to review the export and import policy on pulses.

December 1, 2017

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Macroeconomic Development

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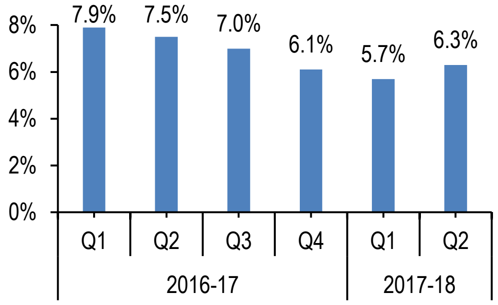
GDP grows at 6.3% in the second quarter of 2017-18

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (at constant prices) of the country grew at 6.3% in the second quarter of 2017-18, over corresponding period a year ago.[1] This was slightly higher than 5.7% in the first quarter of 2017-18. Trend in GDP growth in the last six quarters can be seen 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 6.1% in the second quarter of 2017-18. The sectors of mining and electricity saw an increase in growth (year-on-year). Agriculture and services saw a decline in growth. Details on sectoral GVA growth are in Table 1.

Table 1: Gross Value Added across sectors in Q2 of 2017-18 (% growth year-on-year)

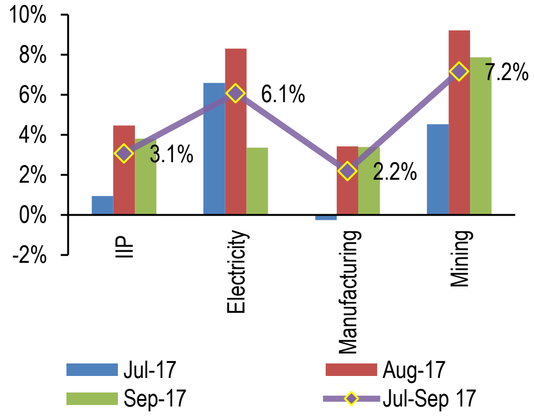
Sector	Q2 2016-17	Q1 2017-18	Q2 2017-18
Agriculture	4.1	2.3	1.7
Mining	-1.3	-0.7	5.5
Manufacturing	7.7	1.2	7.0
Electricity	5.1	7.0	7.6
Construction	4.3	2.0	2.6
Services	9	8.7	7.1
GVA	**6.8**	**5.6**	**6.1**
GDP	**7.5**	**5.7**	**6.3**

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

Industrial production grew by 3% in the second quarter of 2017-18

The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew by 3.1% in the second quarter (Jul-Sept) of 2017-18, as compared to the same period in 2016-17.[2] Mining production saw the highest increase of 7.2% in this quarter, followed by an increase of 6.1% in electricity and 2.2% in manufacturing. Figure 1 shows the change in industrial production in the second quarter of 2017-18, and the average for the quarter.

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



Sources: MOSPI; PRS.

Finance

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Cabinet approves setting up of the 15th Finance Commission

The Union Cabinet approved the setting up of the 15th Finance Commission.[3] The Commission will be chaired by Mr. N. K. Singh (former MP and Secretary, Government of India), and have four members: (i) Mr. Shaktikanta Das (former Secretary, Government of India), (ii) Dr. Anoop Singh (Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University), (iii) Dr. Ashok Lahiri (Chairman, Bandhan Bank), and (iv) Dr. Ramesh Chand (Member, NITI Aayog).[4]

The Constitution requires the Finance Commission to be set up every five years.[5] The Commission will make recommendations for the five year period from 2020 to 2025 on subjects including: (i) sharing of central taxes with the states, (ii) principles which govern the distribution of central grants to states, and (iii) measures to improve the financial position of states in order to supplement the resources of panchayats and municipalities.

The Commission will also study the impact of the Goods and Services Tax on the finances of the central and state governments, among others. The Commission will submit its report by October 30, 2019.

The 14th Finance Commission submitted its report in February 2015 with recommendations for the five-year period between the April 2015 to March 2020. For more details on the 14th Finance Commission, please see here.

Task Force set up to draft new direct tax law

The Ministry of Finance set up a Task Force to review the Income Tax Act, 1961 and draft a new direct tax law.[6] Mr. Arbind Modi (Member, Central Board of Direct Taxes) will be the convener of the Task Force. The Task Force will comprise chartered accountants and tax advocates, among others. Mr. Arvind Subramanian, Chief Economic Adviser, will be a permanent special invitee.

The terms of reference of the Task Force is to draft a direct tax law keeping in view: (i) direct tax system prevalent in various countries, (ii) international best practices, (iii) economic needs of India, and (iv) any other connected matters. The Task Force will submit its report within six months.

Cabinet approves establishment of the National Anti-Profiteering Authority

The Union Cabinet approved the creation of the posts of Chairman and Technical Members of the National Anti-Profiteering Authority (NAPA).[7,8] The creation of these posts will allow for the immediate establishment of the NAPA under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) framework.

Subsequently, Mr. B. N. Sharma (currently serving as Additional Secretary, Ministry of Finance) was appointed as the Chairman of NAPA.[9] The Ministry also appointed other Technical Members.

The NAPA will ensure that any reduction in GST rates is passed on to the consumers by a commensurate reduction in the price of goods and services. It will identify GST taxpayers who have not passed on such benefits by reducing prices. In the event of a taxpayer not reducing prices, the NAPA may order a reduction in prices, impose penalties or cancel the registration of a person.

The NAPA will cease to exist two years after the Chairman takes charge, unless the GST Council recommends otherwise.[8]

GST Council reduces tax rates on some items; increases eligibility under composition scheme

The GST Council recommended certain changes related to tax rates, dates for filling tax returns, and eligibility under the composition scheme.[10,11] Key recommendations of the Council include:

- **Reduction in GST rates:** The Council recommended reducing the number of items under the 28% tax rate from 224 to 50. Some of the items on which tax rates were reduced include furniture, detergents, fans, marble and granite, and bulldozers.
- Tax rates were also reduced on certain items falling under other tax brackets (18%, 12%, and 5%). These items include refined sugar, puffed rice, and idli and dosa batter. Tax rates on restaurants was reduced to 5% (from the current rate of 18% on AC restaurants and 12% on non-AC restaurants).
- **Eligibility under the composition scheme:** The central and state GST laws allow certain taxpayers with annual turnover less than one crore rupees to pay GST on turnover, instead of the value of supply of goods and services. The Council recommended increasing this limit to two crore rupees. This change will be implemented after the central and state GST laws are amended.

Alternate Mechanism constituted for consolidation of public sector banks

An Alternate Mechanism was constituted for the consolidation of public sector banks.[12] The Mechanism will be chaired by Mr. Arun Jaitley, Minister of Finance. It will have Mr. Piyush Goyal (Minister of Railways and Coal), and Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman (Minister of Defence) as its members. Earlier, in August 2017, the Cabinet had given its in-principle approval for public sector banks to merge.

The Mechanism will examine proposals received from banks for approval to formulate schemes for amalgamation. It may also direct banks to examine proposals for amalgamation.

The final scheme for amalgamation of public sector banks will be approved by the central government, and laid before Parliament.

For more details on the Union Cabinet's in-principle approval for public sector banks to merge, please see the PRS Monthly Policy Review for August 2017, here.

Age for joining the National Pension System increased to 65 years

The Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority increased the upper age limit for joining the National Pension System (NPS) from 60 years to 65 years.[13]

Currently, any Indian between the age of 18 to 60 years may voluntarily join the NPS. The Authority observed that due to better healthcare facilities and increased fitness, people are living an active life allowing them to be employed productively for longer. Consequently, it received suggestions to increase the age limit for joining the NPS.

A subscriber joining the NPS after the age of 60 years will be eligible to continue in the system till the age of 70. Such subscribers will have the same investment choices as available to those joining before 60 years.

The exit conditions for subscribers is: (i) if exit after three years of joining, then 40% of the amount will have to be annuitized (where amount is invested for fixed returns) and the remaining amount may be withdrawn lump sum, or (ii) if exit is before three years of joining, then 80% of the amount will have to be annuitized.

Corporate Affairs

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Ordinance promulgated to amend the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016

The President promulgated the Insolvency and Bankruptcy (Amendment) Ordinance, 2017 on November 23, 2017.[14] It amends the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016.[15] The Code provides a time-bound process for resolving insolvency in companies and among individuals. Insolvency is a situation where individuals or companies are unable to repay their outstanding debt. Key features of the Ordinance include:

- **Resolution applicant:** The Code defines a resolution applicant as a person who submits a resolution plan to an insolvency professional. (A resolution plan specifies the details of how the debt of a defaulting debtor can be restructured.) The Ordinance amends this provision to define a resolution applicant as a person who submits a resolution plan after receiving an invite by the professional to do so.
- **Ineligibility to be a resolution applicant:** The Ordinance inserts a provision prohibiting certain persons from being a resolution applicant and submitting a resolution plan. These include: (i) undischarged insolvents (individuals unable to repay their debt), (ii) wilful defaulters, (iii) a person whose account has been identified as a non-performing asset for more than a year, (iv) a person convicted of an offence punishable with two or more years of imprisonment, (v) a person disqualified as a director under the Companies Act, 2013, or (vi) anyone connected to a person mentioned above (including promoters or people in control of the defaulting firm during the implementation of the resolution plan).
- **Liquidation:** The Ordinance prohibits the insolvency professional from selling the property of the defaulter to any such persons during liquidation.

Note that on November 7, 2017, the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India amended its regulations to specify that a resolution plan will include certain details of the resolution applicant similar to those specified in the Ordinance.[16] These are related to: (i) conviction of any offence, (ii) disqualification as director, and (iii) identification as a wilful default, among others.

More details of the ordinance are available here.

Committee set up to review the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs constituted an Insolvency Law Committee to examine suggestions for improving the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016.[17] The Committee will be chaired by the Secretary, Ministry of Corporate Affairs. Its members will include representatives from: (i) RBI, (ii) Ministry of Finance, (iii) law firms, (iv) chartered accountants, and (v) company secretaries.

The Committee will: (i) examine the implementation of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016, and (ii) identify issues and make recommendations on issues that impact the efficiency of the corporate resolution and liquidation framework.

The Committee will submit its recommendations within two months from its first meeting.

Telecom

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TRAI releases recommendations on Net Neutrality

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) released recommendations on Net Neutrality.[18] Net Neutrality requires that telecom service providers treat all Internet traffic on an equal basis. This means that there would be no discrimination with respect to the type, origin, or destination of the content or the means of its transmission.[19] Key recommendations include:

- **Principle of non-discriminatory treatment:** Internet access providers should not discriminate on the basis of content (such as video, calls, email, and cloud services), and the means of its access. Such discrimination can include blocking, slowing down or degrading based on content including applications, services, and devices.
- Note that, in February 2016, TRAI released regulations prohibiting any agreement resulting in discriminatory tariffs for data services or online content.[20]
- **Exemptions:** Department of Telecommunications can identify certain specialised services which can be exempt from the principle of discriminatory treatment. Voice over IP, television over IP, and tele-surgery maybe identified as specialised services. Further, Content Delivery Networks which deliver content within the network of the telecom service provider without going through public internet are exempt from the principle of non-discriminatory treatment.
- **Licenses:** TRAI recommended that license agreements of Internet services in India should be amended to incorporate the principle of non-discriminatory treatment of content.
- **Monitoring and enforcement:** The Department of Telecommunications can establish a multi-stakeholder body which will be responsible for: (i) enforcing the principle of non-discriminatory treatment, and (ii) monitoring internet traffic management principles.
- Members of the body should include: (i) internet service providers, (ii) telecom service providers, (iii) content providers, (iv) research and academia, and (v) consumer representatives.

Information Technology

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Expert Committee releases white paper on a data protection framework for India

The Committee of Experts on a Data Protection Framework for India (Chair: Justice B. N. Srikrishna) released a white paper.[21] The Committee was constituted in August 2017 to examine issues related to data protection, recommend methods to address them, and draft a data protection law.[22]

The Committee suggested that a framework to protect data in the country should be based on seven principles: (i) law should be flexible to take into account changing technologies, (ii) law must apply to both government and private sector entities, (iii) consent should be genuine, informed and meaningful, (iv) processing of data should be minimal and only for the purpose for which it is sought, (v) entities controlling the data should be accountable for any data processing, (vi) enforcement of the data protection framework should be by a high-powered statutory authority, and (vii) penalties should be adequate to discourage any wrongful acts.

The Committee also raised some questions related to the data protection framework. These questions are related to: (i) scope and exemptions under the framework, (ii) grounds for data processing, obligation on entities and rights of individuals, and (iii) regulation and enforcement of the framework. The Committee has invited comments on the white paper till December 31, 2017.

A PRS summary of the report is available here.

Environment

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Indian Forest (Amendment) Ordinance, 2017 promulgated

The Indian Forest (Amendment) Ordinance was promulgated.[23,24] It amends the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Under the Act, the definition of tree includes palms, bamboos, stumps, brush-wood and canes. The Ordinance amends this definition to remove the word bamboos.

Prior to this amendment, felling and transporting bamboo grown on forest and non-forest land were subject to provisions of the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Following the amendment, bamboo growing in non-forest areas will be waived off the requirement of permission for its felling or transportation for economic use.

More details on the ordinance are available here.

Transport

Draft regulations on civil use of drones released by DGCA

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The Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) released draft regulations on the civilian operation of remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS), commonly known as drones.[25,26] The draft regulations provide the details of permits required to operate civilian drones. Key guidelines include:

- **Definition:** A remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) is defined as an unmanned aircraft which is piloted from a remote station.
- **Classification:** The RPAs will be classified on the basis of their maximum take-off weight, as follows: (i) nano (less than or equal to 250 gm), (ii) micro (between 250 gm and 2 kg), (iii) mini (between 2 kg and 25 kg), (iv) small (between 25 kg and 150 kg), and (v) large (greater than 150 kg).
- **Identification requirements:** All civil RPAs will be required to obtain a unique identification number (UIN) from DGCA. A UIN will be granted if the RPA is wholly owned by: (i) an Indian citizen, or (ii) the central or state governments, or their companies, or (iii) a company that is registered and has its principal business in India, and the Chairman and two-thirds of board members are Indian citizens, or (iv) a company that is registered in India and has leased RPAs to any other eligible organisations.
- **Permit requirements:** All civil RPA operations for any purpose will require an unmanned aircraft operator permit, to be issued by DGCA. Entities exempted from requiring these permits include: (i) nano RPA operating up to 50 ft above ground level, in uncontrolled airspace & indoor operations, (ii) micro RPA operating up to 200 ft above ground level, in certain areas, and (iii) RPA owned and operated by government security agencies.
- **Operations:** Irrespective of height, operation of RPA in the mini and above categories will be conducted only after filing flight plan and obtaining necessary clearances. RPAs must be operated only during daylight.
- All RPA operators, except nano, must inform the local police authority in writing prior to commencing the operations. Before entering the controlled airspace, the remote pilot must establish contact with the air traffic control.

All four wheelers sold after December 1, 2017 to be fitted with FASTags

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The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways notified that all four-wheelers sold after December 1, 2017 must have FASTags fitted on them.[27,28] The FASTags will be fitted by the vehicle manufacturer or the authorised dealer. In case of vehicles that are sold as drive away chassis (framework of the vehicle) without the wind screen, FASTag will have to be fitted by the vehicle owner before it is registered.

FASTag is a reloadable tag which enables automatic deduction of toll charges and lets vehicles pass through toll plazas without stopping for cash transaction. The tag uses radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology and is affixed on the vehicle's windscreen after the tag account is active.

Dividend payable by the Railways to General Revenues to be waived off for 2016-17

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The Union Cabinet approved the proposal of Ministry of Railways to move a resolution in Parliament adopting the recommendations of the Railway Convention Committee (2014).[29] The Committee recommended that the dividend payable to general revenues for 2016-17, estimated at Rs 9,731, may be waived off as a one-time move. [30] Railways paid a return on the budgetary support it received from the government every year, known as dividend. Post the merger of the Railways budget with the Union budget, from 2017-18, Railways are not required to pay dividend to the central government. The Committee made the recommendations citing the critical state of Railway's finances. Factors such as, the cost of implementing the 7th Central Pay

Commission have adversely impacted the state of Railway's finances.

Law and Justice

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Cabinet approves revision of salaries for Supreme Court and High Court judges

The Union Cabinet approved the revision of remuneration (including salary, gratuity, allowances, and pension) for judges of the Supreme Court and High Court.[31] This revision follows the implementation of the Seventh Central Pay Commission which revised salaries of central government employees.[32] It will be applicable from January 1, 2016.

To give effect to this revision, amendments will be made to two laws: (i) The Supreme Court Judges (Salaries and Conditions of Service) Act, 1958, and (ii) High Court Judges (Salaries and Conditions of Service) Act, 1954. It is expected to impact 31 judges of the Supreme Court, 1,079 judges of High Courts, and about 2,500 retired judges.

For more details on the recommendations of the Seventh Central Pay Commission, please see here and here.

Cabinet approves appointment of Second Judicial Pay Commission for subordinate judiciary

The Union Cabinet approved the appointment of the Second Judicial Pay Commission for the subordinate judiciary in the country.[33,34] Subordinate judiciary refers to courts at the district level and below. The Pay Commission will be headed by Justice (Retd.) J. P. Venkatrama Reddi (former judge of the Supreme Court), and Mr. R. Basant (former judge of the Kerala High Court) as its member.

The Commission will: (i) examine the current pay structure and service conditions of judicial officers in states and union territories, (ii) evolve a structure to govern pay and emoluments of such officers, (iii) examine the work methods, work environment, and the allowances available to judicial officers, and (iv) suggest rationalisation and simplification of these allowances.

The Commission will make recommendations to state governments within 18 months.

Cabinet approves continuation of scheme for judiciary infrastructure

The Union Cabinet approved the continuation of the centrally sponsored scheme for development of infrastructure facilities for the judiciary.[35] The scheme will be implemented beyond the 12th Five Year plan (i.e., 2012 to 2017) till March 31, 2020 at a cost of Rs 3,320 crore. Under the scheme, court halls and residential accommodation will be constructed for judicial officers of the district and subordinate courts.

Funds for the scheme will be shared in 60:40 ratio (i.e., 60% of the funds will be paid by the central government and the remaining 40% will be paid by the state governments). The ratio for north-eastern and Himalayan states will be 90:10.

The Cabinet also approved the setting up of an online monitoring system with geo-tagging of court halls and residential accommodation being construction. This would assist in collecting data on the progress and the completion of buildings under construction.

Space

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Draft Space Activities Bill, 2017 released

The Department of Space has released a draft Space Activities Bill, 2017.[36] The Bill seeks to promote and regulate space activities in India including promotion of private participation in the sector. Currently, space activities are regulated by policies such as the Satellite Communication Policy, 1997 and Remote Sensing Data Policy, 2011. Key features of the Bill include:

- **Regulatory mechanism:** The central government is responsible for setting mechanisms and promoting space activity. This includes exploration and use of outer space, and development of the sector.
- The central government can: (i) grant, transfer, or terminate licenses to any person for commercial space activities, (ii) provide professional and technical support, and authorisation to launch or operate space objects, and (iii) monitor the conformity of space activity with international space agreements to which India is a party.
- **Terms and conditions of licences:** A license granted by the central government includes: (i) permission for the central government to inspect any space activity

and documents related to space activity, and (ii) obligation on the licensee to insure himself against any liability incurred due to any activity authorised by the license.

- **Penalties:** The draft Bill provides for penalties for: (i) unauthorised commercial space activity (Rs one crore), (ii) furnishing false information or documents (Rs 50,000), (iii) causing environmental damage (Rs one crore), (iv) entry into prohibited areas (Rs 50,000), and (vi) disclosure of restricted information (Rs 50,000).
- **Liabilities:** A licensee should compensate the central government against claims brought against the government regarding damages arising out of commercial space activities covered under the license.
- **Protection of action taken by the central government:** No legal proceedings can lie against the central government with respect to anything done in good faith in pursuance of space activity.
- **Intellectual property rights:** Intellectual property rights developed during the course of space activity will be protected under the law. Further, any intellectual property right developed onboard a space object in outer space will be deemed to be the property of the central government.

Comments on the draft Bill are invited till December 21, 2017.

Women and Child Development

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Cabinet approves expansion of Mission for Protection and Empowerment for Women

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the expansion of schemes under the 'Mission for Protection and Empowerment for Women' for a three year period from 2017-18 to 2019-20.[37] The approved sub-schemes are focussed on (i) care, protection and development of women, (ii) improvement in child sex ratio, and (iii) ensuring education for girls and empowering them.

CCEA also approved a new scheme called 'Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra (PMMSK)'. This scheme aims to empower rural women through community participation to help them realise their full potential. PMMSK is envisaged to work at the national, state, district, and block levels.

Key features of these changes include:

- **Support to women:** Support to women affected by violence through 'One Stop Centres' to be established in 150 districts. These Centres will be linked with a helpline and will provide 24 hour emergency and non-emergency response to women affected by violence both in public and private spaces. There will be engagement of Mahila Police Volunteers on a voluntary basis in states/UTs to create public-police interface.
- **Community engagement:** Community engagement through student volunteers in 115 most backward districts will be instituted as part of the PMMSK block level initiatives. These student volunteers will be part of awareness generation regarding various important government schemes as well as social issues.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** One task force will be created at the national, state and district levels for planning, reviewing and monitoring all the sub-schemes under the Mission. This is to ensure convergence of action and cost efficiency. Mechanism for monitoring the outcomes of all the sub-schemes will be suggested by NITI Aayog.

Housing and Urban Affairs

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Carpet area eligible for interest subsidy under the credit linked subsidy scheme increased

The Union Cabinet approved the increase in the carpet area of houses eligible for interest subsidy under the Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme (CCLS) for the Middle Income Group (MIG) under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.[38] Under the CLSS, a subsidy is provided on home loans taken by eligible urban poor for buying or constructing a house.[39] Initially it only included the Economically Weaker Section/ Lower Income Group. In February 2017, the benefits under CCLS were extended to the Middle Income Group (MIG). There are two categories of MIG beneficiaries: (i) MIG-I (annual income between six lakh rupees and Rs 12 lakh), and

(ii) MIG-II (annual income between Rs 12 lakh and Rs 18 lakh). Key changes include:

- **Carpet area:** The carpet area of houses eligible for interest subsidy under the scheme for the MIG will be increased from: (i) 90 square meter to 120 square meter for MIG-I and (ii) 110 square meter to 150 square meter for MIG-II.
- **Timeline:** CLSS for MIG was implemented initially for a period of one year in 2017, starting from January 1, 2017. The scheme is now extended till March 31, 2019.
- **Benefits available:** Beneficiaries seeking loans from notified institutions will be eligible for an interest subsidy, as follows:

Table 2: Details of the CCLS for MIG

Particulars	MIG-I	MIG- II
Household Income (Rs. per annum)	Between Rs six lakh and Rs 12 lakh	Between Rs 12 lakh and Rs 18 lakh
Interest subsidy (% per annum)	4%	3%
Maximum loan tenure (in years)	20	20
Eligible Housing Loan Amount for Interest Subsidy (Rs.)	Rs 9 lakh	Rs 12 lakh
Carpet Area of dwelling unit	120 sq.m.	150 sq.m.

Sources: Operational guidelines of CCLS for MIG, Press Information Bureau; PRS.

Additional houses approved under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban)

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has approved the construction of 1,12,083 for the benefit of urban poor under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) (PMAY).[40] For this purpose, the Ministry has approved an investment of Rs 8,105 crore with central assistance of Rs 1,681 crore. As of July 2017, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs had sanctioned the construction of 21,00,475 houses.[41] Table 3 below provides details of the allocation of the new sanctions amongst different states.

Table 3: Details of approved sanctions

State	No. of houses	Investment (Rs crore)	Central Assistance (Rs crore)
Madhya Pradesh	34,680	3,080	520
Haryana	24,221	1,721	363
Maharashtra	11,523	860	173
Jharkhand	28,477	2,080	427
Kerala	9,836	295	147
Mizoram	3,270	65	49

Sources: Press Information Bureau; PRS

For further details regarding the PMAY scheme, refer to the PRS Monthly Policy Review of September 2015 here.

Education

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Cabinet approves creation of an agency to conduct all entrance examinations for higher educational institutions

The Union Cabinet approved the creation of an autonomous body, the National Testing Agency (NTA), to conduct entrance examinations for higher educational institutions.[42] The creation of such an agency was announced by the Finance Minister in the Budget speech of 2017-18.[43]

The NTA aims to provide standardised examinations and to relieve the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the All India Council for Technical Education, and other agencies from the responsibility of conducting entrance examinations. It will be established as a society registered under the Indian Societies Registration Act, 1860. Key features of the NTA are as follows:

- **Conduct of examinations:** The NTA would initially conduct entrance examinations which are currently conducted by the CBSE. Other examinations will be conducted by it gradually. The entrance examinations will be conducted online at least twice a year.
- **Composition of the NTA:** The NTA will be chaired by an eminent educationist appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The CEO will be the Director General to be appointed by the government and assisted by nine verticals headed by academicians/ experts. There will be a board of governors comprising members from the user institutions.
- **Finances:** The NTA will be given a one-time grant of Rs 25 crore from the central government to start its operations. Thereafter, it will be financially self-sustainable.

Cabinet approves amendment to the NCTE Act, 1993

The Union Cabinet approved the introduction of a Bill to amend the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) Act, 1993.[44] The Act regulates the teacher education system and the standards it must maintain. Under the Act, all institutions running teacher education courses such as Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed.) have to obtain recognition from the National Council for Teacher Education.

The Bill seeks to grant retrospective recognition to the universities (central and state) which are conducting teacher education courses without NCTE permission till the academic year 2017-2018. The amendment aims to make students studying in these universities, or already passed out, eligible for employment as a teacher.

Agriculture

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CCEA approves removal of prohibition on export of all types of pulses

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the removal of prohibition on export of all pulses.[45] Further, the CCEA enabled a Committee (Chair: Secretary, Department of Food and Public Distribution) to review the export and import policy on pulses. This Committee includes secretaries of: (i) Department of Commerce, (ii) Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare, (iii) Department of Revenue, (iv) Department of Consumer Affairs, and (v) Directorate General of Foreign Trade.

CCEA also approved the utilisation of a part of the buffer stock of pulses to provide nutrition to beneficiaries under the central government schemes such as the Mid-day Meal scheme.[46] The buffer stock is maintained by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs. Concerned departments and ministries need to amend their schemes or guidelines to be able to provide pulses under their respective schemes. Note that the CCEA approved a buffer stock of upto 20 lakh tonnes of pulses under the Department of Consumer Affairs, in September 2016.[47]

Minimum support prices for Rabi crops 2017-18 released

Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) for Rabi crops 2017-18 have been released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.[48] The MSP for wheat has been increased from Rs 1,625/quintal to Rs 1,735/quintal. In order to incentivise the production of pulses and oilseeds, the government has announced bonuses for certain crops, over the MSPs approved. Table 4 shows the change in MSPs of Rabi crops between 2017-18 and 2016-17.

Table 4: Minimum support prices of Rabi crops (in Rs/quintal)

Crop	2016-17	2017-18	Change
Wheat	1,625	1,735	110
Barley	1,325	1,410	85
Gram	4,000^	4,400#	400
Masur	3,950#	4,250*	300
Rapeseed-mustard	3,700*	4,000*	300
Safflower	3,700*	4,100*	400

Note: ^ includes bonus of Rs 200/quintal, # includes bonus of Rs 150/quintal, * includes bonus of Rs 100/quintal.
Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare; PRS.

CCEA approves continuation of Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana for 2017-18 to 2019-10

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affair (CCEA) approved continuation of the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana for three years with a financial allocation of Rs 15,722 crore.[49] The scheme will be continued as Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana-Remunerative Approaches for Agriculture and Allied Sector Rejuvenation. The scheme was launched in 2007-08.[50] Under the scheme, financial assistance is provided by the central government to implement agriculture and allied sector schemes.

Under the scheme, funds would be provided to states as 60:40 between the centre and states (90:10 for north-eastern and Himalayan states) according to the following division: (i) 20% of the outlay for sub-schemes such as Crop Diversification Program and Bringing Green Revolution to Eastern India, (ii) 10% of the outlay for innovation and agri-entrepreneur development, and (iii) 70% of the outlay under production growth, infrastructure and assets to states as grants.

LED light fishing prohibited

The Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries released an order prohibiting certain fishing practices beyond territorial waters in the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[51] The order is applicable to all fishing vessels and related auxiliary vessels operating in the Indian EEZ. The prohibitions are as follows:

- Fishing by bull or pair trawling (use of two trawlers together to catch more fish) beyond territorial waters.[52]
- Use of light equipment such as artificial lights, LED lights, and fish light attractors by all fishing vessels.

CCEA approves Special Banking Arrangement for payment of outstanding fertilizer subsidy

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affair (CCEA) approved the implementation of a Special Banking Arrangement (SBA) of Rs 10,000 for payment of outstanding fertilizer subsidy during 2016-17 retrospectively. Fertilizers are provided at subsidised rates to farmers through fertilizer manufacturers and importers. Such fertilizer companies are provided funds against their subsidy claims under the SBA.

Home Affairs

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Law Commission submits report on implementing convention against torture

The Law Commission of India (Chairperson: Dr. Justice B. S. Chauhan) submitted its report on "Implementation of 'United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment' through legislation" to the Ministry of Law and Justice on October 30, 2017.[53] The Commission also submitted a draft Prevention of Torture Bill, 2017. India signed the convention on October 14, 1997 but has not ratified it so far.

The matter was referred to the Law Commission in July 2017 following a recommendation by the Supreme Court. Key observations and recommendations of the Commission include:

- **Ratification of convention:** The Commission observed India has faced problems in extradition of criminals from foreign countries. This is because the convention prevents extradition to a country where there is danger of torture. It recommended that this issue should be resolved by ratifying the convention.
- **Definition of torture:** The Commission observed that there is no definition of torture in the current Indian laws. According to the draft Prevention of Torture Bill, 2017, any public servant or an individual authorised by him indulges in an act of torture if they inflict on another person: (i) grievous hurt, (ii) danger to life, limb, or health, (iii) severe physical or mental pain, or (iv) death for the purpose of acquiring information or punishment.
- **Punishment for acts of torture:** In order to deter the use of torture, the Commission recommended stringent punishments for individuals who commit such acts. According to the draft Prevention of Torture Bill, 2017, punishment for torture includes imprisonment up to 10 years and fine. In case torture leads to death, the punishment includes death or life imprisonment in addition to fine.

A PRS summary of the report is available here.

Energy

Ethanol pricing for public sector oil marketing companies revised

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The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the revision of ethanol price under the Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme for supply to public sector oil marketing companies (OMCs).[54] Key changes approved with the new revision include:

- Between December 1, 2017 and November 30, 2018 (ethanol supply period), the price of ethanol for the EBP programme will be Rs 40.85 per litre.
- GST and transportation charges will also be payable additionally.

Blending ethanol with petrol helps reduce vehicle exhaust emissions and reduces the import burden for petroleum. The EBP Programme was launched in 2003 to promote the use of alternative and environment friendly fuels. However, since 2006, OMCs were not able to procure the required quantity of ethanol due to pricing issues of ethanol. Therefore, in order to augment the supply of ethanol, the government has been administering the price of ethanol under the EBP programme since December 2014. The last revision was made in October 2016, when ethanol prices were fixed at Rs 39/litre.[55]

Introduction of Bharat Stage VI fuel ahead of schedule in NCT, Delhi

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The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas has decided to introduce Bharat Stage VI (BS VI) fuel ahead of schedule in the National Capital Territory, Delhi.[56] BS VI fuel will be launched on April 1, 2018 instead of April 1, 2020. In September 2016, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had notified a shift from BS IV fuel to BS VI fuel by April 1, 2020, skipping BS V fuel.[57] The Ministry cited high pollution levels as a reason for the early launch of BS VI fuel in NCT, Delhi. The content of sulphur reduces from 50 ppm in BS IV fuel to 10 ppm in BS VI fuel for both gasoline and diesel.[58]

Drinking Water and Sanitation

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Cabinet restructures National Rural Drinking Water Programme and approves its continuation

The Union Cabinet approved the continuation and restructuring of National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP).[59] The National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) aims at assisting states in providing adequate and safe drinking water to the rural population in the country.[60] Rs 23,050 crore has been approved for the programme from 2017-18 to 2019-20.

Further, to implement the National Water Quality Sub-Mission started in February 2017 under NRDWP, Rs 12, 500 crore will be provided as central share for a period of four years. The sub-mission aims to cover all rural population in arsenic/ fluoride affected habitations with clean drinking water by March 2021.

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