Monthly Policy Review

December 2020

Highlights of this Issue

National lockdown extended till January 31, 2021 with no further modifications (p. 2)
The eleventh extension of the lockdown continues to maintain the same protocols as those currently in force. The focus is on surveillance and containment so that new Covid-19 cases are reduced.

Operational guidelines for COVID-19 vaccine released (p. 2)
The guidelines identify priority groups as healthcare and frontline workers, and those over 50 years of age. It also specifies training and safety precautions, establishes a digital platform and surveillance systems to monitor progress.

Standing Committee submits report on management of COVID-19 (p. 4)
Key recommendations include: (i) framing a national plan to deal with future crises, (ii) augmenting public health infrastructure, and (iii) ensuring interstate operability of rations until One-Nation One-Ration card is implemented.

RBI announces additional measures for liquidity support (p. 3)
On-tap TLTRO (targeted long-term repo) scheme was extended to cover 26 COVID-related stressed sectors. The temporary decision (taken in April) to prohibit banks from declaring dividend for 2019-20 was finalised.

Union Cabinet approves the Atmanirbhar Bharat Rojgar Yojana (p. 4)
The central government will pay PF contribution (of both employers and employees) for new employees for two years. For establishments with more than 1,000 employees, it will only fund the employees' contribution.

Standard operating procedure for surveillance of new variant of SARS-CoV-2 issued (p. 3)
All passengers arriving from United Kingdom between November 25, 2020 – December 23, 2020 to be kept under observation. Passengers arriving between December 21-23, 2020 must be subjected to RT-PCR test.

First round of the National Family Health Survey-5 released (p. 9)
The first round of the survey covers key indicators on population, child health, and nutrition for 17 states. It finds: (i) most states have achieved targeted fertility rate, (ii) increase in malnutrition among children in several states.

National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws Act amended through an Ordinance (p. 10)
The validity of the 2011 Act was extended to December 31, 2023. The unauthorised colonies: (i) which existed as on June 1, 2014, and (ii) having 50% development as on January 1, 2015 will be eligible for regularisation.

Comments invited on the report of the expert committee on non-personal data (p. 14)
The revised draft of the report on non-personal data governance framework defines high-value datasets of non-personal data. It provides for mandatory sharing of such high value datasets for public good purposes.

New framework for the proliferation of broadband through public wi-fi networks (p. 15)
The framework named Prime Minister's Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) will allow local shops and small establishments to set up public wi-fi access points without any licence, registration, or fees.

Draft Indian Ports Bill, 2020 released for public comments (p. 12)
The draft Bill proposes to establish a Maritime Port Regulatory Authority and state Maritime Boards for regulation of ports. It lays down a dispute redressal mechanism, standards for safety, and mechanisms for waste management.

Comments invited on the Draft National Rail Plan (p. 11)
Projects worth Rs 38 lakh crore are proposed for augmentation of Railways infrastructure during the 2021-2051 period. These include three new dedicated freight corridors and several high-speed rail corridors.

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COVID-19

As of December 31, 2020, there were 1,02,66,674 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in India.[1] Of these, 98,60,280 had been cured/discharged and 1,48,738 persons had died.[1] For details on the number of daily cases in the country and across states, please see here.

With the spread of COVID-19, the central government has announced several policy decisions to contain the spread, and financial measures to support citizens and businesses who would get affected. For details on the major notifications released by centre and the states, please see here. Key announcements made in this regard in December 2020 are as follows.

Lockdown extended till January 31, 2021

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To contain the spread of COVID-19, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) had imposed a 21-day national lockdown in March.[2] Since then, the lockdown has been extended eleven times, with the latest extension till January 31, 2020.[3] The latest lockdown guidelines extend the applicability of the December 2020 lockdown guidelines by another month.[4] The December 2020 guidelines stressed on containing further COVID cases by focusing on a prescribed containment strategy, surveillance, and strict observance of lockdown-related guidelines.

For a summary of the December 2020 guidelines, please see here.

Operational guidelines for COVID-19 vaccine released

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The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare released operational guidelines for the COVID-19 vaccine.[5] The guidelines note that over 274 candidate vaccines for the COVID-19 virus are in different stages of development globally. These guidelines are a part of preparatory measures to ensure that vaccines can be rolled out expeditiously, whenever it is available. Key features of the guidelines include:

- **Priority groups:** The vaccine will be rolled out in a phased manner. Phase I will cover healthcare and frontline workers, and persons above 50 years of age. This will be followed by people below the age of 50 years with associated co-morbidities. The latest electoral rolls for Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections will be used for identifying population on the basis of age.
- **Training:** The guidelines recommend carrying out training of trainers for enumerators, health functionaries and communication using a mix of virtual and face-to-face training. It states that the vaccine will be introduced after all training is completed at the district and planning unit. Cold chain handlers, and vaccinators will be trained on procedures for vaccine, logistics management, infection prevention and control precautions.
- **Sessions:** The vaccination process would be similar to election process, with states identifying specific days for vaccination. A vaccination team will consist of: (i) a vaccinator officer including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and others authorised to administer injections; (ii) two vaccination officers responsible for checking registration status, regulating entry and authenticating identification documents; and (iii) two vaccination officers acting as support staff to manage crowds and ensure a 30-minute waiting time post-vaccination.
- **Tracking:** A digital platform, COVID-19 Vaccine Intelligence Network (Co-WIN) system, will be used to track enlisted beneficiaries for vaccination vaccines on a real-time basis. The existing surveillance system monitoring adverse events following immunisation will be utilised to understand safety profiles. This will be integrated with Co-WIN system to ensure rapid detection.
- **Safety and management**: Sufficient police arrangements must be made to ensure that there are no leakages in delivery systems for vaccines. States must ensure that an adequate cold-chain storage capacity exists.

Establishment of Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium proposed

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The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare proposed establishment of Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG), in view of new variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus.[6] INSACOG will be responsible for expanding genomic sequencing of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the country. Genomic sequencing refers to the study of genetics. The genomic sequencing of the virus will help in: (i) understanding current status of new variants of the virus in the country, (ii) establishing a surveillance mechanism for early detection of genomic variants, and (iii) determining genomic variants in unusual events (such as super-spreading and high mortality).

A two-level structure has been proposed to facilitate the genome sequencing in the country: (i) central level, and (ii) regional level. At the central level, a nodal unit will be created at the National Centre for Disease Control, which will coordinate with state/district level surveillance units. At the regional level, regional genome sequencing laboratories (RGSL) will conduct genome sequencing.

Sequencing will be conducted through ten RGSLs across the country. All sequencing data will be maintained in a national database at National Institute of Biomedical Genomics, Kalyani and Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, Delhi.

Initially, the priority for genome sequencing will be given to: (i) RT-PCR positive samples during past two months, and (ii) RT-PCR positive arriving international passengers since November 23, 2020 till December 22, 2020. In addition, a random sampling of 5% positive samples since November 23, 2020 will sent for genome sequencing in concerned RGSLs. Further, each state will have to send 5% of positive samples, detected daily, to the nearest RGSL for the genome sequencing.

As of December 29, 2020, out of all passengers who arrived at various Indian airports from United Kingdom between November 25, 2020 and December 23, 2020, 114 were found to be positive and their samples were sent for genome sequencing. Six samples were found to be positive with the genome variant detected in United Kingdom and genome sequencing of other samples is under progress.[7]

Standard operating procedure for epidemiological surveillance and response to new variant of SARS-CoV-2 issued

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The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued standard operating procedure (SOP) for epidemiological surveillance and response in the context of new variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus detected in United Kingdom.[8] The SOP provides for actions required at the point of entry in the country for all international passengers who travelling from or transited through United Kingdom since November 25, 2020 to December 23, 2020. Key features of the SOP include:

- **Actions to be taken at international airports:** All international passengers arriving from United Kingdom between December 21-23, 2020 must be subjected to RT-PCR test. For passengers who test positive, the spike gene-based RT-PCR test should be performed. Passengers testing positive must be isolated in an isolation facility and the samples must be sent for genome sequencing.

  In case the genome sequencing indicates new variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus, the isolation of the patient must be continued in a separate unit. The patient must be tested on 14th day from the day of initial positive test result. In case of positive test result, further sample may be taken until two consecutive samples, at an interval of 24 hours, test negative.
- **Responsibilities of Bureau of Immigration:** The Bureau of Immigration must share the details of all flights (between November 25, 2020 to December 23, 2020), from United Kingdom at various international airports in India, to state government/integrated disease surveillance program (IDSP).
- **Surveillance by IDSP:** All contacts of RT-PCR positive international passengers arriving on December 21-23, 2020 must be quarantined in separate isolation units and must be subjected to be testing (RT-PCR test and if found positive, spike gene-based RT-PCR). All RT-PCR negative passengers must be advised for home quarantine. District surveillance officers should ensure daily follow up with passengers under observation for up to 28 days from the date of arrival in India.

RBI announces additional measures for liquidity support

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Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced policies to ease financial stress caused by COVID-19.[9] The measures announced include:

- **Liquidity measure**: In October 2020, RBI had announced the launch of on-tap TLTRO (targeted long term repurchase operations), up to March 31, 2021.[10] Under the scheme, banks can borrow money for a period of three years which may either be (i) invested in bonds and other financial instruments, or (ii) used to extend loans to entities operating in certain sectors. Previously, sectors covered by the scheme were agriculture, agri-infrastructure, MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises), and drugs, pharmaceuticals and healthcare.
- The scheme has been expanded to cover entities in 26 stressed sectors (such as real estate, construction, and hospitality)

identified by the Expert Committee on Resolution of COVID-19 related Stress.[11] The Committee (Chair: K. V. Kamath) was constituted by RBI in August to make recommendations related to the Resolution Framework for COVID-related Stress.[12]

- **Freeze on dividend payment by banks**: In April 2020, RBI announced that banks could not declare dividend from the profits for the financial year 2019-20 until further assessment.[13] The freeze was instituted as a measure to conserve capital of banks. RBI has now finalised its decision to prevent banks from declaring dividend from the profits of the financial year 2019-20.

Union Cabinet approves the Atmanirbhar Bharat Rojgar Yojana

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In November 2020, the Finance Minister announced measures to increase employment, and provide stimulus to certain sectors.[14] One of these measures was a new scheme, i.e., the Atmanirbhar Bharat Rojgar Yojana to provide government subsidy for provident fund contributions. The Union Cabinet has now approved the scheme.[15]

The Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 provides for a contribution-based provident fund scheme for employees in establishments. As per the newly approved scheme, the central government will pay the employees' provident fund (EPF) contribution for new employees for two years. For establishments with less than 1,000 employees, the government will cover the EPF contribution of 12% each of both the employer and the employee. For others, the government will only cover the employee's EPF contribution.

The benefit will be available to new employees earning less than Rs 15,000 per month and engaged between October 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021. New employees are defined to mean: (i) employees who were not working in any establishment registered with the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) before October 1, 2020 and did not have a Universal Account Number (UAN) or EPF member account number prior to October 1 2020, or (ii) any EPF member possessing UAN who left employment between March 1, 2020 and September 30, 2020 and did not join any EPF covered establishment up to September 30, 2020. The UAN is a unique member number allotted by the EPFO (set up under the 1952 Act).

The Union Cabinet approved an expenditure of Rs. 1,584 crores on the scheme for the current financial year and Rs 22,810 crore for the entire scheme period (2020-2023).

Standing Committee submits report on management of COVID-19

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The Standing Committee on Home Affairs submitted its report on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.[16] Key recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Preparedness**: The Committee noted that the sudden imposition of the lockdown caused an unprecedented economic disruption. It also caused fear and anxiety among migrant workers leading to large-scale movement of migrants back to their home states. To address such a crisis in the future, the Committee recommended framing a national plan and guidelines under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 and the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897.
- **Health infrastructure**: The Committee noted that the central and state governments incurred heavy expenditure on COVID-19 treatment. It noted the need for a strong public healthcare system to deal with such shocks. Therefore, it recommended greater investment in health infrastructure to scale up public health services and increasing budgetary allocation to public hospitals.
- **Vaccines**: The Committee recommended that while undertaking vaccine trials, all mandatory requirements must be fulfilled, and all phases of the trial must be completed. The Committee noted that emergency use authorisation should only be used in the rarest of rare cases.
- **Data collection**: The Committee noted that a study is needed to understand the patterns in test rate, recovery and fatality rate. It also recommended that relevant data should be made publicly available to the research community to provide inputs for COVID-19 management, and to provide real-time solutions to control the pandemic. Such disclosure should follow principles of data anonymisation, security and privacy laws.
- **Malpractices**: The Committee noted reports of private hospitals selling beds for treatment and black-marketing and overpricing of certain medicines. It recommended a comprehensive national public health Act to keep a check on private hospitals and black-marketing, and creating

awareness campaigns on availability of cheaper and effective repurposed medicines.

- **Social impact**: To address the social impact of COVID-19 on the poor, the Committee recommended that a national database on migrant workers be launched at the earliest to help in their identification and to ensure delivery of rations and benefits to them.
- **Food distribution**: The Committee recommended that until all states implement One Nation One Ration card, inter-state operability of ration cards must be allowed.
- **Economic impact**: The Committee observed that MSMEs were very adversely affected sectors during the pandemic. It noted the need to support MSMEs with dire working capital requirements to sustain the impact of COVID-19.

For a PRS summary of the report, see here.

Suspension of corporate insolvency proceedings under IBC extended

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The Ministry of Corporate Affairs extended the suspension of corporate insolvency resolution proceedings under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016 for three months starting December 25, 2020.[17] The suspension was extended by three months in September, 2020.[18] The latest notification further extends the suspension such that no insolvency proceedings can be initiated for defaults occurring between March 25, 2020 and March 24, 2021.

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020 was promulgated in June 2020 to suspend the initiation of insolvency resolution proceedings against corporate debtors during COVID-19.[19] It provided that no insolvency proceedings can be initiated against corporate debtors for defaults occurring between March 25 and September 24, 2020. The Ordinance allowed the government to extend the suspension by up to six months.

Domestic civil flight capacity increased

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The Ministry of Civil Aviation increased the domestic civil flight operation capacity from 70% to 80%.[20] Domestic civil flight operations were partially resumed with certain limitations in May 2020.[21]

Flights from United Kingdom to India temporarily suspended

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The Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) suspended all flights to and from United Kingdom till January 7, 2021.[22,23] The suspension of flights came into effect on December 22, 2020. The suspension is not applicable to international all-cargo operations and flights specifically approved by DGCA.

Airlines are required to ensure that no passenger from United Kingdom boards any flight to India and to any destination within India.[22]

Any passenger arriving to India from United Kingdom is required to take an RT-PCR test at the arrival port in India. Passengers testing COVID-19 positive will be quarantined as per the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. All medical costs incurred will be borne by the passengers.[22]

The Environment (Protection) Third Amendment Rules, 2020 notified

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The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change notified the Environment (Protection) Third Amendment Rules, 2020 which amend the Environment (Protection) Rules, 1986.[24] The 1986 Rules specify that the central government may prohibit/restrict industrial locations or industrial activities in an area, through notifications.[25] Such restrictions may include: (i) limits on industrial pollutants and emissions (such as a limit on nitrogen oxide emission from thermal power plants), and (ii) proximity to human settlements (restrictions on industrial activities within certain areas from the boundaries of human settlements).

The amendments extend the validity of the notifications with such restrictions, expiring in financial year 2020-21, to June 30, 2021 in view of COVID-19 pandemic.

Directions for aeromedical disposition of COVID-19 positive aircrew issued

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The Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) issued directions for aeromedical disposition of COVID-19 positive aircrew.[26] Aeromedical disposition refers to medical assessment of individuals for flying purposes. The key features of the directions include:

- **Asymptomatic crew:** All asymptomatic aircrew is required to undergo 10 days home isolation. After completion of this period, the aircrew may be declared fit for unrestricted flying by an authorised medical attendant.
- **Mildly symptomatic crew:** Aircrew with mild symptoms will undergo home isolation. After completing isolation period, the aircrew may be discharged from isolation after 10 days of no symptoms and three days of no fever. Aircrew with up to 14 days of isolation period will have aeromedical disposition as that of asymptomatic crew.
- Aircrew with isolation period more than 14 days will be examined by the DGCA on completion of isolation. The aircrew may commence flying on being declared fit for flying by DGCA.
- **Moderately/severely symptomatic crew:** Aircrew with moderate or severe symptoms, after clinical recovery, will have to undergo special medical examination at Indian Air Force boarding centres. Such pilots will be considered fit for flying if their clinical examinations and laboratory investigations reveal no functional deficit.

SOP and guidelines for organising sports competitions released

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The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has released the standard operating procedures (SOP) and guidelines for organising sports competitions in the country in a COVID-19 environment.[27] Key features of the SOP include:

- **Facility arrangements:** All workout areas, fields of play, gymnasiums, washrooms and other common areas at the sporting arena should be sanitised prior to beginning operations. The medical unit at the sporting venue must have an isolation facility. In the sporting arena, the number of breakout rooms or lounges where individuals gather should be reduced.
- **Institutional arrangements:** A COVID task force must be constituted for each sporting event by the organising committee which will be responsible for implementation and monitoring of these guidelines. The task force will also regulate and monitor the travel of sports personnel.
- **Spectator management:** As far as feasible, natural ventilation must be ensured and use of small enclosed spaces must be discouraged. For outdoor events, spectators will be allowed up to a maximum of 50% of the total capacity of the stadium. For closed enclosures, the guidelines by the central public works department specifying the air-conditioning temperature and humidity must be followed.
- **Other safety measures:** Thermal screening of all sports personnel should be done before allowing access to the common field of play. Depending on the risk perception and scale of event, the organising committee may undertake RT-PCT tests of athletes. Only those with a negative report will be allowed to participate. Athletes from containment zones will not be allowed entry.

Export policies for medical goggles and gloves revised

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The Ministry of Commerce and Industry revised the export policy for medical goggles, and gloves.[28] In January 2020, the export of medical goggles, and nitrile gloves was prohibited.[29] In July 2020, the export policy for medical goggles was revised, permitting export of up to 20 lakh units per month.[30] In October, the export policy for nitrile gloves was revised from prohibited to restricted.[31] The latest notification removes the restrictions, making medical goggles and nitrile gloves freely exportable.

Macroeconomic Development

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Current account surplus at 2.4% of GDP during the second quarter of 2020-21

India's current account balance in the second quarter (July-September) of 2020-21 recorded a surplus of USD 15.5 billion (2.4% of GDP) as compared to a deficit of USD 7.6 billion (1.1% of GDP) in the second quarter of 2019-20.[32] The surplus is lower than the surplus of USD 19.2 billion (3.8% of GDP) recorded in the first quarter (April-June) of 2020-21. The moderation in current account surplus from Q1 to Q2 of 2020-21 was primarily due to a rise in the trade deficit (excess of imports over exports) from USD 10.8 billion in Q1 to USD 14.8 billion in Q2 of 2020-21. Trade deficit in Q2 of 2020-21 (USD 14.8 billion) was lower than the trade deficit in Q2 of 2019-20 (USD 39.7 billion).

The capital account captures transactions that change the asset/liability position of entities in India. Net inflow (inflow minus outflow) in the capital account was USD 15.4 billion in Q2 2020-21 higher than both Q2 of 2019-20 (USD 13.6 billion) and Q1 of 2020-21 (USD 1 billion). This was primarily due to larger net inflow of foreign investment.

Foreign exchange reserves increased by USD 31.6 billion in the second quarter of 2020-21, higher than the increase of USD 5.1 billion in the second quarter of 2019-20, and USD 19.8 billion in the first quarter of 2020-21.

Overall, in H1 of 2020-21 (April-September 2020), India recorded a current account surplus of USD 34.7 billion (3.1% of GDP) compared to the deficit of USD 22.5 billion (1.6% of GDP) in H1 of 2019-20. This was primarily due to a smaller trade deficit of USD 25.6 billion recorded in H1 of 2020-21 as compared to the deficit of USD 86.4 billion in the corresponding period of 2019-20. Foreign exchange reserves increased by USD 51.4 billion in H1 of 2020-21, larger than the increase of USD 19.1 billion in H1 of 2019-20.

Table 1: Balance of Payments, Q2 2020-21 (USD billion)

	Q2 2019-20	Q1 2020-21	Q2 2020-21
Current Account	-7.6	19.2	15.5
Capital Account	13.6	1.0	15.4
Errors and Omissions	-0.9	-0.4	0.6
Change in reserves	5.1	19.8	31.6

Sources: Reserve Bank of India; PRS.

Repo and reverse repo rates unchanged at 4% and 3.35% respectively

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) released its bi-monthly Monetary Policy Statement.[33] The policy repo rate (the rate at which RBI lends money to banks) remained unchanged at 4%. Other decisions of the MPC include:

- The reverse repo rate (the rate at which RBI borrows money from banks) remained unchanged at 3.35%.
- The marginal standing facility rate (the rate at which banks can borrow additional money) and the bank rate (the rate at which the RBI buys bills of exchange) also remained unchanged at 4.25%.
- The MPC decided to maintain an accommodative stance of monetary policy to revive economic growth on a durable basis while ensuring inflation remains within the target band (2% to 6%).

The MPC projected Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation at 6.8% and 5.8% for the third and fourth quarter of 2020-21 respectively. Inflation is expected to be between 5.2% and 4.6% in the first half of 2021-22.

Finance

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RBI released draft Directions for entities dealing in OTC derivatives

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) released the draft Market-makers in OTC Derivatives Directions, 2020 for public comments.[34] The Directions will apply to entities such as banks and primary dealers that deal in over the counter (OTC) derivatives. Derivatives are instruments that are settled at a future date and derive their value from changes in interest rate, exchange rate, or an underlying security.[35] OTC derivatives are contracts that are directly traded between two parties (as opposed to those traded on a stock exchange). For a derivative contract, an entity that provides both bids and offers at the same time is a market-maker. The draft Directions seek to replace guidelines issued in 2007.[36] The draft Directions provide:

- **Governance**: The Board of Directors and senior management of the market-maker should set up effective risk management and internal control policies before engaging in market making.
- **Due diligence**: The market-maker must undertake due diligence at the time of introduction of an OTC derivative product. This includes an assessment of the objectives of the product, target client, and key risks for the client from the product.
- **Pricing and valuation**: Pricing and periodic valuations of derivatives must be documented. Sellers cannot sell derivatives that they cannot price independently.
- **User dealing conduct**: A seller of a derivative product must undertake due diligence about the buyer. A seller can only sell a product that is understood by the buyer, suited to the buyer's requirements.

Comments on the draft framework are invited till January 15, 2021.[37]

IFSCA notifies Regulations for operating a Bullion Exchange in the IFSC

The International Financial Services Centre Authority (IFSCA) notified the Bullion Exchange Regulations, 2020.[38] The Regulations provide a framework for recognition of bullion exchanges, and bullion clearing corporations in the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC). The Finance Minister had announced a plan to set up bullion exchanges in the IFSC in the 2020-21 Budget speech.[39] Bullion is defined to include gold, silver, and other precious metals. Bullion exchanges can trade contracts for purchase and sale of bullion, derivatives on bullion, and bullion depository receipts. Bullion depository receipt is a document of title for bullion stored in an empanelled vault. Key features of the Regulations include:

- **Recognition**: An applicant may be recognised as a bullion exchange or a bullion clearing corporation if the applicant meets certain criteria. These include: (i) net worth of USD 30 million, (ii) requisite financial and functional expertise, and (iii) the directors meet the fit and proper criteria.
- **Functions of bullion exchange**: The bullion exchange is responsible for regulating bullion contracts and the conduct of intermediaries (such as trading members) for the protection of consumers. Further, every exchange must avail the services of a clearing corporation.
- **Ownership**: Any bullion exchange or recognised stock exchange, Indian or of a foreign jurisdiction, may provide the services of a bullion exchange or clearing corporation in the IFSC. Up to 51% of paid-up share capital can be held by the bullion or stock exchange (whether Indian or foreign).
- **Obligations**: Every bullion exchange must establish a consumer education and protection fund to compensate consumers in case of defaults. Every bullion clearing corporation must establish a Fund to guarantee settlement of trades executed on a bullion exchange.
- **Bullion depositories and vaults**: A bullion depository maintains records of transactions of bullion depository receipts, which are documents of title of bullion stored in vaults. The Regulations outline the functions, duties and obligations of these entities.

RBI permits Regional Rural Banks to access additional liquidity facilities

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will permit Scheduled Regional Rural Banks to access the liquidity adjustment facility, the marginal standing facility, and the call money market.[40] These measures are expected to improve liquidity management. Until now, these facilities were available to scheduled commercial banks, certain co-operative banks and primary dealers. Scheduled Regional Rural Banks that meet certain criteria (such as maintenance of adequate capital) will be eligible to avail the facilities.

Liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) is a window through which RBI provides liquidity (at the repo rate) and absorbs liquidity (at the reverse repo rate). Marginal standing facility (MSF) is a facility where banks can borrow additional liquidity over the limits prescribed under the LAF. Call money market is a market for uncollateralised, interbank short-term lending.

RBI releases draft circular on distribution of dividend by NBFCs

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) released a draft circular on distribution of dividend by non-banking financial companies (NBFCs).[41] Key features of the circular include:

- **Eligibility**: NBFCs that meet minimum threshold values for financial parameters such as non-performing assets (NPAs) may be eligible to declare dividend. The financial parameter considered varies for different kinds of NBFCs. For example, Deposit taking NBFC (NBFC-D), and Systemically Important Non-Deposit taking NBFC (SI-ND-NBFC), must maintain (i) capital adequacy ratio of at least 15%, and (ii) net NPA of less than 6%, for three successive years, including the year for which it proposes to declare dividend.
- NBFCs may be eligible to declare dividend even if the above criteria are not met for the previous two years, provided: (i) the norm for capital adequacy is achieved, and (ii) net NPA is less than 4%, for the year for which dividend is proposed to be declared.
- **Amount of dividend payable**: The draft circular provides the maximum dividend pay-out ratio that will be permitted for various combinations of capital adequacy and net NPA. NBFCs achieving higher capital adequacy ratio and lower net NPA will be allowed to declare a greater proportion of their net profit as dividend (dividend pay-out ratio). The permissible pay-out ratio ranges from 10% to 50%.
- Restrictions on dividend pay-out ratio do not apply to NBFCs that don't access or intend to access public funds, or interface with customers (Type I NBFC).[42]
- **Applicability**: If notified, the circular would be applicable for dividend to be declared for financial year 2020-21 onwards.

Health

First round of the National Family Health Survey-5 released

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The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has completed the first round of the fifth phase of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).[43] The fourth round of NFHS was conducted five years ago in 2015-16. The survey covers key indicators on population, reproductive and child health, family welfare, and nutrition. The first phase covers 17 states and 5 union territories. Key results of the survey include:

- **Fertility rate:** The replacement level of fertility at which population stability is achieved (i.e., population replaces itself) has been achieved in 19 out of the 22 states and union territories. Three states (Bihar, Manipur, and Meghalaya) have a total fertility rate (average number of children born to a woman) higher than the replacement level.
- **Sex ratio:** Sex ratio at birth refers to the number of female children born per 1,000 male children. It was below 900 in Telangana, Himachal Pradesh, Goa, Daman and Diu, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli.
- **Infant mortality:** Infant mortality rate has marginally declined in nearly all states. Assam has seen one of the largest drops in it, from 48 deaths (per 1,000 live births) to 32 deaths. It remains high in Bihar (47 deaths per 1,000 live births).
- **Malnutrition**: Nutritional status of children below 5 years of age is worsening. Stunting or chronic malnutrition (i.e., low height with respect to age) has increased in 11 of the 17 states. Proportion of severely wasted children has increased in 13 of the 17 states. Wasting or acute malnutrition refers to low weight with respect to height. Children who are stunted or wasted are more vulnerable to diseases and illness.
- **Internet usage:** Across all states, the proportion of men who have used the internet was higher than women, with the difference being higher than 25%-point in states such as Telangana, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh. In Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Tripura, less than 25% women have used internet.

For a chart-based discussion on the survey, please see here.

ICMR paper discussing the health and economic impact of air-pollution released

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The India State-level Disease Burden Initiative published a paper discussing the economic impact and disease burden attributable to air pollution for 2019.[44] This initiative was launched in 2015 as a joint effort between more than 100 institutions under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (including Indian Council of Medical Research). Key findings of the paper include:

- **Deaths:** 17 lakh deaths in India in the year 2019 can be attributed to air pollution. This is 18% of the total deaths in India in 2019.
- **Economic loss:** The economic loss due to lost output from premature deaths and morbidity was 1.4% of the GDP, equivalent to Rs 2.6 lakh crore. The economic loss due to this as a percentage of state GDP was higher in norther states. The highest among them were Uttar Pradesh (2.2% of the GSDP) and Bihar (2% of the GSDP).
- **Increase in death rate:** Between 1990 and 2019, death rate from outdoor ambient air pollution increased by 115%.

Heavy Industries

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Standing Committee submits report on downturn in the automobile sector

The Standing Committee on Industry submitted its report on ‘Downturn in Automobile Sector – its impact and measures for revival’.[45] The Committee looked at the downturn in the sector in 2019-20, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector, and recommended measures for the revival of the sector.

The Committee observed that there has been a downturn in the sector from 2019-20. The drop in sales has forced manufacturers to cut production, including the production of auto components and ancillaries. As a result, about 3.45 lakh jobs in the auto sector have been lost. Further, the national lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a complete shutdown of the industry, leading to a loss of approximately Rs 2,300 crore per day during the national lockdown.

Table 2: Domestic automobile sales

Grade	April-Sept 2019	Change from same period in 2018
Passenger vehicles	13,33,251	-23.6%
Commercial vehicles	3,75,480	-23.0%
3 Wheelers	3,30,696	-6.7%
2 Wheelers	96,96,733	-16.2%
Total	**1,17,36,976**	**-17.1%**

The Committee recommended the following measures for revival of the sector:

- **Rationalisation of GST rates:** Internal combustion engine (ICE) based vehicles (includes all petrol and diesel-engine based vehicles) attract the highest GST rate of 28% and an additional compensation cess ranging from 1% to 22%. The Committee recommended that a GST rate of 18% will help bring down the prices, and drive up the demand for these vehicles. Further, the GST rate on used cars should be reduced from the current 12% or 18% to 4%.
- **Relief package:** The Committee observed that the relief package announced by the government to revive the economy post the COVID-19 pandemic falls short of addressing issues related to the automobile sector. It held that the package is targeted to boost only the supply side of the economy. It recommended that the government should announce a stimulus package for demand generation in the auto sector.
- **Other measures:** The Committee recommended: (i) expenditure incurred by auto sector companies for making payments to temporary and contract labour during the lockdown should be eligible for corporate social responsibility (CSR) expense, (ii) self-certification by manufacturers should be allowed for regulatory requirements instead of testing and subsequent approval by government agencies.

For a PRS summary of the report, see here.

Sports

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Standing Committee submits its report on Preparation for Olympic Games, 2021

The Standing Committee Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports submitted its report on Preparation for Olympic Games, 2021.[46] Key recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Shortage of coaches:** The Committee noted that 561 vacancies exist for the positions of coaches. It recommended filling these up in a time-bound fashion.
- **Training:** Head coaches must create a customised 200-day plan for qualified athletes based on assessments taking into account physiological, mental and nutritional evaluations.
- **Procurement of sports equipment:** The Committee recommended appointing a Chief Procurement Officer to coordinate and fast-track procurement of sports equipment.
- **Financial support:** The Committee recommended certain measures for providing financial support to sportspersons: (i) guaranteeing a minimum fixed financial aid for every athlete doing well at the national level, (ii) formulating a mechanism to ensure financial security for players and coaches during and post their careers based on their contribution, and (iii) covering life and health insurance for all Olympians. Further, it recommended a 3% sports quota reservation in government jobs for all medal winning athletes.
- **Funding:** The Committee recommended the Indian Olympic Association to sign up with a sponsorship management firm to gain corporate sponsorship for the Olympics.
- **Investment:** The Committee recommended that state governments should recognise sports as an 'industry' under their industrial policies to encourage investment in the sector. It also recommended taking measures to increase the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) contributions to sports, which currently comprises only about 2% of all CSR funds.

For a PRS summary of the report, see here.

Urban Affairs

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The National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws Act amended

The National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws (Special Provisions) Second (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020 was promulgated on December 30, 2020.[47] The Ordinance amends the National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws (Special Provisions) Second Act, 2011.[48]

The 2011 Act provides for: (i) relocating slum dwellers and Jhuggi-Jhompri clusters in accordance with the provisions of the Delhi Shelter Improvement Board Act, 2010 and the Master Plan for Delhi, 2021, (ii) regularising unauthorised colonies, village abadi areas (and their extensions), (iii) creating a policy or plan for farm houses constructed beyond permissible building limits, and for all other areas of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, and (iv) not taking any punitive action and minimising inconvenience to the people of Delhi in case of any demolition or sealing of structures under the Master Plan for Delhi. The Master Plan for Delhi 2021 was notified by the central government on February 7, 2007. It provides for strategies of housing for urban poor as well as for dealing with the informal sector.

The 2011 Act was valid till December 31, 2020. The Ordinance extends this deadline to December 31, 2023.

The 2011 Act also provided for the regularisation of unauthorised colonies (i) which existed as on March 31, 2002, and (ii) where construction took place till June 1, 2014. The Ordinance amends this to provide that the unauthorised colonies will be identified for regularisation as per the National Capital Territory of Delhi (Recognition of Property Rights of Residents in Unauthorised Colonies) Act, 2019, and the National Capital Territory of Delhi (Recognition of Property Rights of Residents in Unauthorised Colonies) Regulations, 2019. Thus, the unauthorised colonies: (i) which existed as on June 1, 2014, and (ii) having 50% development as on January 1, 2015 will be eligible for regularisation.[49]

For a PRS summary of the report, see here.

Transport

Metro Railways General Rules notified

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The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs notified the Metro Railways General Rules, 2020 under the Metro Railways (Operation and Maintenance) Act, 2002.[50] The Rules replace the Metro Railways General Rules, 2013.[51] The 2020 Rules seek to regulate the operation and maintenance of all metro railways in India, except the Kolkata metro (which is under the purview of the Ministry of Railways). Key features of the 2020 Rules include:

- **Personnel:** The Rules provide directions on the conduct and specific duties for persons working in the Metro Authorities and those authorised to manage services within it. The personnel regulated under the Rules include the station controller, platform supervisor and booking office staff. The Rules also specify qualifications for train operators and other key personnel. For instance, a driver must have a certificate of competence and medical fitness.
- **Safety:** The Rules specify protocols to be followed to mitigate safety concerns like poor visibility and speed limits to be adhered with. Stations must have emergency exits. Protocols to be followed in cases of accidents, unusual occurrences, mechanical failures and flooding have also been laid down in the Rules. For example, in case of flooding, those observing water accumulation on the tracks must report it to the traffic controller. The traffic controller then must instruct and notify train operators of all trains required to pass through the area to reduce speed or not enter the area.
- **Crowd management:** The Station Controller can decide when a build-up of passengers becomes unmanageable. Flow of passengers can be reduced by: (i) making a warning announcement and stopping inwards escalators, (ii) switching out some inward automatic fare collection barriers, (iii) instructing the ticket sales staff to stop selling tickets, and (iv) closing station entrances for new passengers.
- **Emergency evacuation:** The Station Controller can control evacuation due to cessation of train services or any other emergency. In such an event: (i) all automatic fare collection barriers will be set to open freely in the exit direction, (ii) information will be passed using the public address system, (iii) inwards escalators may be used in the outward direction, and (iv) ticket sales will be suspended.
- Under the Rules, each station must also be provided with Station Working Orders specifying: (i) location of equipment and guidelines for use, (ii) emergency evacuation routes, (iii) designated entrances for police, fire and ambulance vehicles, and (iv) list of medical facilities which are locally available.

Comments invited on the Draft National Rail Plan

Saket Surya (saket@prsindia.org)

The Ministry of Railways invited comments on the Draft National Rail Plan.[52,53,54] The plan seeks to improve the infrastructural capacity of Railways to cater to growth in demand up to the year 2050. It aims to increase the modal share of Railways in freight from 27% currently to 45% by 2030. The implementation cost of projects under the plan will be about Rs 38 lakh crore (see Table 3).

These projects will be executed between 2021 and 2051.[53] The plan envisages an initial surge in capital investment up to 2030. Post 2030, it is expected that revenue surplus generated would be adequate to finance future capital investments and government funding will not be required.

Table 3: Cost of National Rail Plan (in Rs lakh crore)

Head	2021-26	2026-31	2031-41	2041-51	Total
Dedicated Freight Corridors	-	1.5	0.5	0.3	2.3
High Speed Rail Corridors	-	5.1	2.9	7.0	15.0
Network improvements	1.3	0.7	2.2	1.8	6.0
Flyovers and Bypasses	0.8	-	-	-	0.8
Terminals	0.6	0.2	0.1	0.04	0.9
Rolling Stock	3.1	1.7	3.6	4.8	13.2
Total	**5.8**	**9.2**	**9.3**	**13.9**	**38.2**

Key proposals under the Plan are:

- **Dedicated freight corridors:** Three new dedicated freight corridors with a cumulative length of 5,750 km will be developed: (i) East coast (Kharagpur-Vijaywada), (ii) East-West (Palghar-Dankuni), and (iii) North-South (Pirthala-Arakkonam).[53]
- **High-speed rail corridors**: Several high-speed rail corridors with a cumulative length of 7,479 km will be developed (Table 3).
- **Network improvements:** Number of lines will be increased on specified routes with higher capacity utilisation or high traffic demand such as Delhi-Howrah, Mumbai-Chennai, and Kharagpur-Udhna. Connectivity with ports and industrial corridors will be improved. These projects will cover 75,194 network kilometres.[53]

Table 4: Proposed High-Speed Rail Corridors

Phase	Corridors
2031	Delhi-Ayodhya-Varanasi, Varanasi- Patna, Patna-Kolkata, Delhi-Udaipur-Ahmedabad
2041	Hyderabad-Bangalore, Nagpur-Varanasi
2051	Mumbai-Nagpur, Mumbai-Hyderabad, Patna-Guwahati, Delhi-Chandigarh-Amritsar, Amritsar-Pathankot-Jammu, Chennai-Bengaluru-Mysuru

Comments on the draft Plan are invited until January 22, 2021.[54]

Draft Indian Ports Bill, 2020 released for public comments

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The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways released the draft Indian Ports Bill, 2020 for public comments.[55] The draft Bill seeks to repeal the Indian Ports Act, 1908.[56] It seeks to enable growth of ports and increased investment by establishing effective administration and management of all ports in India.[57] Key features of the draft Bill include:

- **Maritime Port Regulatory Authority:** The draft Bill proposes to establish the Maritime Port Regulatory Authority. The Authority will consist of: (i) a Chairperson, two full-time members (with a term of five years) appointed by the central government, of which one will be in the legal field, and (iii) two part-time members (with a term of two years) nominated in rotation by coastal states. Functions of the Authority include: (i) advising the central government on formulation of the National Port Policy, (ii) aiding in formulating and implementing short-term plans, (iii) monitoring and assessing ports, (iv) specifying standards for safety and quality of vessels and port assets, and (v) determining measures to promote investment, technological advancement, and growth in the sector.
- **State Maritime Board:** Every state government must establish a State Maritime Board for ports other than Major Ports (notified by the central government). State Maritime Boards can initiate plans for development of ports, and license infrastructure and services.
- **Dispute redressal:** For Major Ports, a Bench consisting of nominated members from the Authority will receive and adjudicate on complaints concerning: (i) anti-competitive practices, (ii) abuse of dominant positions, or (iii) disputes between Port service providers and terminal operators. For all other ports, Adjudicatory Boards constituted by state governments can adjudicate on disputes concerning: (i) rights and obligations of ports, (ii) port officials, users, service providers and licensees, and (iii) private operators.
- The draft Bill lays down safety and security requirements to be followed by all ports and vessels. For instance, every port must appoint officers and prepare plans to ensure security based on requirements notified by the central government. It also mandates all

ports and terminals to provide facilities for waste and pollution management.

Draft rules issued to establish National Road Safety Board

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The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways released the draft National Road Safety Board Rules, 2020 under the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.[58,59] The draft Rules establish the National Road Safety Board proposed in the Motor Vehicle (Amendment) Act, 2019.[59] Key features of the draft Rules include:

- **Composition:** The draft Rules propose that the Board consist of: (i) the Chairman, (ii) three to seven members appointed by the central government, and (iii) the Secretary, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways or his representative (ex-officio member). The Chairman and members must have at least 20 years of experience in fields of automobile, road safety, urban planning, or law, among others.
- **Term and meetings:** The Chairman and members will have a term of three years and are eligible for re-appointment for one more term. The Board is required to meet at least once every month.
- **Functions:** Functions of the Board include: (i) licensing and registration of motor vehicles, (ii) regulating billboards and commercial signage, (iii) formulating guidelines on standards for safety equipment, road infrastructure, control of traffic, establishing and operating trauma facilities and para-medical facilities.
- **Technical Working Groups:** The Board can constitute Technical Working Groups consisting of a Chairman and independent technical experts with experience in the field of work. These Groups may deliberate on matters including: (i) transport safety and road standards, (ii) traffic management, (iii) crash investigations, and (iv) motor vehicle, fuel and noise standards.

Comments on the draft Rules are invited till January 7, 2021.[58]

Draft rules making provision of airbags in front passenger seats mandatory released

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The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways released the draft Central Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Rules, 2020 amending the Central Motor Vehicles Rules, 1989.[60] The draft rules propose to make it mandatory for vehicles to be fitted with airbags for the front passenger seat. It seeks to apply this requirement for vehicles manufactured on April 1, 2021 for new models and June 1, 2021 for existing models. Comments on the draft Rules are invited till January 28, 2021.[61]

Comments invited on the draft Aircraft (Investigation of Accident and Incident) Amendment Rules, 2020

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The Ministry of Civil Aviation invited comments on the draft Aircraft (Investigation of Accident and Incident) Amendment Rules, 2020.[62] The draft Rules seek to amend the Aircraft (Investigation of Accidents & Incidents) Rules, 2017.[63] Some of the key features of the draft Rules are:

- **Publication of investigation report:** The draft Rules require the Director General of Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau to make the investigation report public.
- **Definition of missing aircraft and safety recommendation of global concern:** The draft Rules specify that an aircraft will be considered as missing when official search is terminated, and no wreckage is located.

  The draft Rules also add that any safety recommendation regarding systemic deficiency with: (i) probability of recurrence, (ii) significant global consequences, and (iii) requirement of timely action to improve safety, will be termed as safety recommendation of global concern (SRGC). Systemic deficiencies refer to lack of compliance to regulation or standard.
- **Classification of serious incidents:** The draft rules add that: (i) retraction of landing gear leg or wheels-up landing, and (ii) dragging of any part of an aircraft (such as wing tips and engine pods), will be considered as a serious incident when not classified as an accident.

Comments on the draft Rules are invited until January 15, 2021.

Electronics and Information Technology

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Comments invited on the report of the expert committee on non-personal data

In July 2020, an Expert Committee constituted by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to study various issues relating to non-personal data had published a draft report for public consultation.[64] Based on the feedback received, the Committee has released a revised version of the draft report.[65] Key recommendations under the revised draft are:

- **Definition of non-personal data**: Under the first draft, non-personal data was defined as any data which is not personal data as defined under the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 (PDP Bill) or data without any personally identifiable information. The PDP Bill defines personal data to include data pertaining to characteristics, traits, or attributes of identity, which can be used to identify an individual. The revised draft retains this definition.
- The Committee recommended that the PDP Bill should be amended to remove provisions related to non-personal data so that there is no overlap between the two regulatory frameworks. Currently, the PDP Bill empowers the central government to direct any entity to provide non-personal data for targeting of delivery of services or formulation of evidence-based policies by the government.
- The first draft had categorised non-personal data among: (i) public: data collected or generated by government, (ii) community: raw or factual data which is sourced from a community of natural persons, and (iii) private: data which is collected or generated by private entities through privately owned processes (derived insights or proprietary knowledge). In the revised draft, the Committee has removed this classification.
- **High-value datasets**: The first draft provided that the government may specify certain datasets as high-value datasets at a national level. The revised draft defines a high-value dataset as a dataset beneficial to the community at large and is shared as a public good, subject to certain guidelines. It will include datasets useful for: (i) creation of new and high-quality jobs, (ii) creation of new businesses, and (iii) socio-economic objectives such as financial inclusion, healthcare, and urban planning. A representative entity called data trustee may be appointed for creation, maintenance, and sharing of high-value datasets. The data trustee will request the data custodian (entity collecting, processing, and storing data) to provide the required data.
- **Sharing of non-personal data**: As per the first draft, sharing of non-personal data could be mandated for defined purposes including: (i) sovereign: national security, law enforcement, or regulatory purposes, (ii) public interest: community benefits, research and innovation, policy making for better delivery of public services, and (iii) economic: to encourage competition or provide level-playing field among for-profit entities. The revised draft only requires data sharing for public good purpose. It only mandates sharing of high-value datasets managed by data trustees. The Committee observed that data sharing for sovereign purposes, and for business purposes between for-profit entities, already exist and hence, has not made any recommendations on it.

Comments on the revised draft are invited by January 27, 2021. For a summary of the revised draft of the report, see here. For a summary of the first draft of the report, see here.

Comments invited on the draft National Strategy for Additive Manufacturing

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology invited comments on the Draft National Strategy for Additive Manufacturing.[66] Additive manufacturing (popularly known as 3D printing) refers to the construction of a three-dimensional object from a digital 3D model by adding materials layer by layer. The technology is being utilised in a variety of industries such as aerospace, electronics, and consumer goods.

The Ministry noted that the additive manufacturing industry is growing rapidly and is expected to be at USD 36 billion by 2023. However, in comparison to countries such as USA, China, and Germany, the adoption of additive manufacturing has not seen much traction in India.[66] It identifies certain key challenges in the adoption of additive manufacturing. These include: (i) high cost of equipment and material due to dependence on import, (ii) lack of formal industry standards, (iii) lack of skilled manpower, and (iv) uncertainty in the regulatory and legal framework. Key recommendations under the draft strategy include:

- **Promotion of additive manufacturing:** Government procurement policies should encourage the purchase of additive manufacturing machines, manufactured components, and systems for their operations. Preferential market access policy should be developed to support local manufacturers. Additive manufacturing should be included in the government schemes for technology upgradation for MSMEs. Following benefits to the industry are suggested: (i) long term tax benefits, (ii) ready to use facilities at a subsidised rental cost, and (iii) benefit in electricity tariffs for units with high consumption requirement.
- **National Additive Manufacturing Centre**: A dedicated Centre may be constituted to lead the national initiative for development and adoption of additive manufacturing technologies. The Centre may take initiatives such as a study of the sectoral potential for integrating additive manufacturing and development of standards and certifications.
- **Research:** A centre of excellence dedicated to additive manufacturing may be established. The research efforts in the area of additive manufacturing could be supported by an increase in grants-in-aid. Intellectual property developed through government-funded projects should be made accessible. International partnership for research and development at government as well as industry level should be encouraged.
- **Skill development:** For the development of manpower for additive manufacturing, engineering curriculum, as well as industry-driven apprenticeship programs, should include additive manufacturing. Free online resources, certifications, and diploma should be provided with training modules for all educational levels. A special curriculum for the training of teachers should be developed to acclimatise them with the technology.

Communications

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New framework for the proliferation of broadband through public wi-fi released

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) released a new framework called the Prime Minister's Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) for the proliferation of broadband through public wi-fi networks.[67,68] The framework seeks to improve last-mile broadband connectivity through a network of public wi-fi access points. The framework will facilitate local shops and small establishments in becoming wi-fi service providers. The PM-WANI framework will involve the following:

- **Public Data Office (PDO)**: PDOs are entities which will procure internet bandwidth from telecom/internet service providers and establish and operate PM-WANI compliant wi-fi access points. PDOs will not be required to obtain any licence or register with any authority. No fees will be charged to PDOs for providing services.
- **Public Data Officer Aggregator (PDOA)**: PDOA will be an aggregator of PDOs and will perform the functions relating to authorisation of users and accounting of subscription charges on their behalf. PDOAs will need to register with the DoT.
- **App provider**: App providers will develop an app to register a user, discover the PM-WANI compliant wi-fi access points in the nearby area, and display the same within the App to the users for accessing internet. App providers will be required to register with the DoT. The registration with DoT will provide permission for pan India operations to both PDOA and App provider.
- **Central Registry**: The central registry will maintain the details of PDOs, PDOAs, and App providers (made available through PDOAs). It will certify the systems and software applications of PDOA and app providers for compliance with the specifications of the framework.

The potential user will need to download the app of any of the app providers, get authenticated, and thereafter access internet from any PM-WANI compliant wi-fi access point.

Cabinet approves auction of spectrum

The Union Cabinet approved the proposal to conduct auction of spectrum in 700 MHz, 800 MHz, 900 MHz, 1,800 MHz, 2,100 MHz, 2,300 MHz, and 2,500 MHz frequency bands.[69] Spectrum worth Rs 3.9 lakh crore will be auctioned. Spectrum will be assigned to the successful bidder for a period of 20 years.

Successful bidders may pay entire bid amount in one go. They will also have an option to pay a certain amount upfront and remaining amount in up to 16 equated annual instalments. For spectrum in 700 MHz, 800 MHz, and 900 MHz bands, 25% of the bid amount will be required to be paid upfront. For other bands, 50% of the bid amount will be required to be paid upfront. A moratorium of two years will be available for payment of instalments.

In addition to the bid amount, successful bidders will also have to pay 3% of the Adjust Gross Revenue (AGR) as spectrum usage charges annually. For this purpose, revenue from wireline services will not be included in the AGR. AGR is arrived after subtracting certain charges and taxes from gross revenue, such as roaming charges passed on to other service providers and any service taxes and sales taxes included in the gross revenue.

Cabinet approves projects for improving telecom connectivity in remote areas

The Union Cabinet approved two projects for improvement in telecom connectivity in remote areas. These projects will be funded from the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF).[70,71] USOF has been established to provide widespread, non-discriminatory, and affordable access to information and communication technology services to people in rural and remote areas. Resources for USOF are raised through a levy on the revenue of all the telecom operators under various licenses. The projects are:

- **Submarine optical fibre cable link between Kochi and Lakshadweep Islands**: Under this project, a direct communication link through a dedicated submarine optical fibre cable will be created between Kochi and 11 islands of Lakshadweep. Currently, the only medium of providing telecom connectivity to Lakshadweep islands is through satellites, and the bandwidth available is limited to 1 Gbps. The estimated cost of the project is Rs 1,072 crore. The project is targeted to be completed by May 2023.
- **Mobile coverage in Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Assam:** This project will provide mobile coverage to 1,683 uncovered villages in Arunachal Pradesh, and 691 villages in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam. The estimated cost of the project is Rs 2,029 crore. The project is targeted to be completed by December 2022.

Information and Broadcasting

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Cabinet approves revision in guidelines for providing DTH services

The Union Cabinet approved revised guidelines for obtaining a license to provide Direct-To-Home (DTH) broadcasting service in India.[72] A DTH license allows the operator to provide broadcasting service directly to the end-user. Key changes made by the guidelines include:

- **Period of license:** Currently, a DTH license is valid for a period of 10 years. This has been increased to 20 years. This license can be renewed for a period of 10 years.
- **License fee:** Currently, the licensee is required to pay an annual license fee of 10% of the company's gross revenue. This has been revised to 8% of the adjusted gross revenue (AGR). AGR is calculated by deducting GST from the gross revenue. This revision will be prospectively applied (on licenses granted after these guidelines). Further, the license fee will be collected every quarter instead of annually.
- **Platform services:** Distribution service providers offer certain programs which are not obtained from satellite-based broadcasters and are specific to each platform. These programs are referred to as platform services. The guidelines provide that DTH operators will be permitted to operate a maximum of 5% of its total channel carrying capacity as permitted platform channels. A one-time non-refundable registration fee of Rs 10,000 will be levied for each such channel.
- **Sharing of infrastructure:** The DTH operators may share their hardware infrastructure with another operator voluntarily. Sharing of infrastructure by the DTH operators may bring in more efficient use of satellite resources and reduce the costs borne by the consumers.

Advisory to comply with ASCI guidelines on online gaming and fantasy sports advertisements issued

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting observed that a large number of advertisements on online gaming and fantasy sports have been appearing on the television. In view of this, it has issued an advisory to all private satellite television channels to ensure compliance with the guidelines issued in November 2020 by the

Advisory Standards Council of India (ASCI). The guidelines by ASCI provide:[73]

- Advertisements must not depict any person under the age of 18 or anyone who appears below the age of 18 engaged in playing an online game for winning real money.
- It must carry a disclaimer stating that the game involves financial risk and may be addictive. Such disclaimer should occupy at least 20% of the advertisement space.
- The advertisements must not present 'online gaming for real money winnings' as an income opportunity or alternative career. Further, it should not suggest that the person engaged in gaming activity is in any way more successful than others.

Home Affairs

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Private Security Agency rules notified

The Ministry of Home Affairs notified the Private Security Agencies Central Model Rules, 2020 under the Private Security Agencies (Regulation) Act, 2005.[74] This Act provides for the regulation of private security agencies in India. The 2020 Rules replace the Private Security Agencies Central Model Rules, 2006. Key features of the Rules include:

- **License**: Security agencies will be required to apply to a controlling authority (appointed under the Act) for a license to operate. To obtain the license, the agency will need to undergo a training session of at least six days covering various subjects such as VIP security, handling communications equipment, knowledge of legal provisions, and management of security agencies. The license will be valid for a period of five years and agencies may apply for a renewal.
- **Background check**: Before employing anyone as a security guard or supervisor, the agency must conduct a character and antecedents check on the applicant. Towards this, the agency may rely on a character and antecedents verification certificate produced by the person, or may verify his antecedents through a check on electronic databases such as the Interoperable Criminal Justice System.
- **Training for guards**: An entry-level security guard must undergo 100 hours of classroom training and 60 hours of field training on various subjects including conduct in public, examining identification papers, use of first-aid, use of security equipment and basic knowledge of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. Ex-servicemen and former police personnel will be required to attend a shorter course with 40 hours of classroom instruction and 16 hours of field training. The detailed training syllabus will be prepared by the controlling authority.
- **Medical check**: The Rules prescribe standards of physical fitness for security guards. These includes criteria based on height, eye sight, and hearing, among others. All security agencies must also ensure that every guard undergoes a medical examination after every 12 months to ensure his continued maintenance of physical standards as prescribed for entry level.
- **Provision for Supervisors**: One supervisor may only supervise the work of up to 15 private security guards. In case guards are on security duty in different premises and it is not practical to supervise their work by one supervisor, the agency must depute more supervisors so that there is at least one supervisor available for every six guards for assistance, advice and supervision.

Agriculture

Draft National Fisheries Policy released

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The Department of Fisheries released a revised draft of the National Fisheries Policy for public comments.[75] The previous draft of the policy was released in February 2020.[76] The policy aims to integrate the various policies relating to different aspects of fisheries (such as inland fisheries, marine plants and animals, processing, and marketing) for its comprehensive development. Key features of the revised draft policy include:

- **Objectives:** The objectives of the policy include: (i) sustainable development of the fisheries sector during 2021-30, (ii) sound management and sustainable development of the resources and associated habitats, (iii) meeting the food and nutritional security of the growing population, (iv) protecting the rights of fishing communities and building their resilience, and (v) making Indian fish and fish products globally competitive.
- **Legal framework:** The Marine Fishing Regulation Acts of coastal states need to be amended to align them with international

agreements to ensure that they cover all the aspects of fisheries management. The central government will prepare a model Bill in this regard for consideration of the states. Similarly, there is a need to prepare a model Bill for regulation of inland fisheries and aquaculture, which can be used by states to replace or amend their existing Acts to make them contemporary and in compliance with the topical requirements.

- **Sustainability:** The expertise of scientific institutions and fishers will be utilised to optimise fishing efforts and implement measures to check resource depletion and ensure sustainability. Comprehensive fisheries management plans will be made to conserve and sustainably manage natural fisheries resources. The policy will also focus on improving the ecological health of the riverine ecosystem and curbing the flow of pollution into rivers and their tributaries.
- **Coordination:** Kerala, Puducherry, and Tamil Nadu have set up co-management structures at different tiers for management of fisheries resources by the government and the community, through instruments such as a charter of rights and duties. The policy aims to take forward such initiatives to the other inland and coastal states. The policy also aims to enhance the mandate of the present Ministry under the Ministry of Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, an umbrella agency for effective fisheries governance. The new Ministry will converge the various institutions working on aspects related to fisheries under different Ministries. The policy also aims to set up a mechanism to allow for better coordination between all concerned agencies of the central and state governments through coordinating bodies.

Comments on the draft policy are invited till January 20, 2021.

Cabinet approves export subsidy for sugar for the 2020-21 season

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The Union Cabinet approved export subsidy worth Rs 3,500 crore to sugar mills.[77] The subsidy aims to reduce the surplus stock of sugar. The subsidy will cover costs incurred by sugar mills in marketing including handling, upgrading, and other processing costs, and transport charges. The subsidy has been approved for export of up to 60 lakh metric tonnes of sugar.

Due to surplus sugar stock with the mills, farmers are not getting their dues for sale of sugarcane to these mills. Hence, the subsidy will be directly credited into farmers' accounts on behalf of mills against the dues and subsequent balance, if any, will be transferred to the mills.

Cabinet approves revised interest subsidy scheme for increasing ethanol production

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The Union Cabinet approved an expansion of the scheme to provide interest subvention to sugar mills and distilleries on loans for augmentation of ethanol production capacity.[78] Interest subvention is provided at the rate of 6% per annum, or 50% of the rate of interest charged, whichever is lower. Earlier, only sugar mills and molasses-based standalone distilleries which produce ethanol from sugarcane juice, sugar syrup, sugar, and B-heavy molasses were eligible under the scheme.[78,79] The revised scheme aims to enhance the capacity for production of first-generation ethanol from other feed stocks as well such as sugar beet, and cereals including rice, wheat, sorghum, maize, and barley.

The central government had fixed a target of 20% blending of fuel-grade ethanol with petrol by 2030, which it plans to prepone to 2025.[78] The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution noted that the blending target cannot be achieved only from the production of ethanol from sugarcane and sugar. This also requires the production of ethanol from other feed stocks, but their current production capacity is not sufficient.

Under the revised scheme, interest subvention will be extended to loans taken for setting up or expanding: (i) distilleries to produce ethanol from other feed stocks producing first-generation ethanol, (ii) grain-based distilleries using dry milling process, and (iii) dual feed distilleries (using both molasses and grain or any other feed stocks). It will also be provided on loans taken for conversion of molasses-based distillers or grain-based distilleries to dual feed distilleries. Only those distilleries will be eligible under the revised scheme which supply at least 75% of the ethanol produced from added capacity to oil marketing companies for blending with petrol.

Education

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Ministry of Education released Policy on School Bag, 2020

A working group constituted by the Ministry of Education, has released the School Bag Policy, 2020.[80] The working group was constituted in 2018 after a Madras High Court ruling that directed the central government to formulate a policy for school bags. The Policy provides recommendations for the reduction in the weight of the school bag.

The Policy recommended that the universally accepted norm of limiting the weight of the school bag to 10% of the student's weight should be followed from Class 1 to Class 10. It observed that a heavy bag can affect a student's spinal posture, foot shape, and walk. It recommended that weight of school bag needs to be monitored and checked on a regular basis in the school. Lockers may be installed for storing and retrieving books and other items for students with disabilities.

Further, it recommended that NCERT must develop guidelines to conduct bagless days in schools using different timetable, experiential pedagogies, and team teaching. Note that the National Education Policy, 2020 had recommended a 10-day bagless period for grades 6-8 where they intern with local vocational experts such as artists and gardeners.[81]

Environment

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Government constitutes high-level ministerial committee for implementation of Paris agreement

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) constituted a high-level inter-ministerial Apex Committee for Implementation of Paris agreement.[82] Paris agreement is an international treaty on climate change, which is aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions globally. The Committee consists of 17 members, which include: (i) Secretary of MoEF as Chairperson, (ii) Additional Secretary, MoEF as Vice-Chairperson, (iii) Additional Director General (Forest), MoEF, and (iii) Joint Secretaries from 14 ministries including Finance, Health and Power, as members.

The Committee will be the national regulatory authority for carbon markets in India. Its functions include: (i) developing policies and programmes to make India's domestic climate change compliant to international obligations, (ii) coordinating communications of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and (iii) define responsibilities of concerned ministries for achieving India's NDC goals. NDCs refer to the climate action plans of various countries around the world. It includes actions planned by countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to achieve goals under the Paris agreement.

Power

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The Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020 issued

The Ministry of Power issued the Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020.[83,84] These have been issued under the Electricity Act, 2003. Key features of the Rules include:

- **Servicing of consumer requests:** Discoms must provide for a web-based information system with details on various procedures and tracking mechanism for all applications for various services. These procedures and services include grant of new/temporary connection or modification of existing connections. The grant of new connection or modification in existing connection must be completed within 7 days for metro cities, 15 days in municipal areas, and 30 days in rural areas from the date of application.
- **Metering:** A new connection must be provided with a smart pre-payment meter or a pre-payment meter, unless approved otherwise by the State Electricity Regulatory Commission (SERC). All defective meters will have to be replaced by the distribution licensees within: (i) 24 hours in urban areas, and (ii) 72 hours in rural areas.
- **Prosumers:** Prosumers refer to people who produce as well as consume electricity. Prosumers will have the rights of a general consumer. They will also be allowed to set up renewable energy generation units. The total generation capacity by prosumers should not exceed limits prescribed by the state regulatory commissions.

- **Compensation for not adhering to performance standards:** SERCs will specify certain standards of performance for the distribution licensees such as limit on interruptions in power supply, maximum time for resolution of complaints and providing other consumer services. If licensees fail to adhere to these standards, they will have to compensate the consumers. The compensation amount will be specified by SERCs and will be provided to consumers as adjustments in their electricity bills.

New and Renewable Energy

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Guidelines for implementation of feeder level solarisation under component-C of PM-KUSUM scheme issued

The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy issued guidelines for implementation of feeder level solarisation under component-C of Pradhan Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahaabhiyaan (PM-KUSUM) scheme.[85] Component-C of the scheme aims at solarisation of 15 lakh grid-connected agricultural pumps (including 7.5 lakh pumps with feeder level solarisation) by 2022.[86,87]

The guidelines specify two methods for installing solar power plants for feeder level solarisation: (i) capital expenditure (CAPEX) mode, and (ii) renewable energy service company (RESCO) mode. The distribution company (discom) will be the implementing agency in their respective areas of distribution. Farmers with power consumption below the benchmark consumption (determined by discoms) will be incentivised.

Under CAPEX mode, 30% of total cost will be provided by the central government as central financial assistance (CFA). The CFA for north-eastern states will be 50%. 40% of the total CFA amount will be provided to discoms on completion of tendering process and signing of agreement with the selected engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contractor.

Under RESCO mode, 30% of the estimated cost of installation of solar plants will be provided to developers as CFA. CFA will be disbursed through discoms on successful commissioning and declaration of commercial operation date of solar plant. Bank guarantees, equivalent to CFA amount, will be required for release of CFA.

The project life of solar plants will be of 25 years. In case of failure of plant within this period, the discom may have to refund CFA amount on pro-rata basis.

All components used in installation of solar power plants must confirm to applicable specifications and guidelines issued by Bureau of Indian Standards and the Ministry. Further, the guidelines specify that the solar plants must mandatorily use indigenous solar panels (with indigenous solar cells and modules).

Space

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Department of Space releases technology transfer policy and guidelines

The Department of Space has released Technology Transfer Policy and Guidelines 2020.[88] The guidelines provide the principle and mechanism for the transfer of technologies developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to the Indian industries.

ISRO will be responsible for identifying technologies for transfer. The Department of Space will be the approval body. All transfer of technologies will be given effect through the New Space India Limited (NSIL) which will fix the license fee and other charges for the transfer.

Each centre of the ISRO must identify technologies which can be transferred, based on factors such as: (i) readiness of the technology, (ii) proven use of the technology, (iii) chances of success in the recipient organisation, and (iv) socio-economic or commercial viability. A dedicated Technology Transfer Cell will be responsible for end-to-end coordination to ensure successful commercialisation of technologies.

Further, the guidelines state that transfer of technology must not be made to any individual. For non-profit or non-government organisations seeking transfer of technologies which have societal application, no transfer of technology cost will be payable. Ordinarily, the cost of transfer will include: (i) cost of direct material or components, (ii) direct staff costs, (iii) travel and logistics expenses, and (iv) intellectual expenses (nominal, up to 5% of total estimated cost).

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