

February 21st and 22nd news:

National:

Nod for six Railway Projects

The government has approved six railways projects with special thrust on Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. CCEA has approved the 130 kilometres long Jeypore-Malkangiri New Line project at a cost of 2676.11 crore rupees. The project is likely to be completed by 2022-23 and will cover the districts of Koraput and Malkangiri of Odisha.

It will also help in combating Left Wing Extremism through development in these districts. It will also provide basic infrastructure support for overall development including industrial development. CCEA also approved doubling of Muzaffarpur-Sagauli and Sagauli-Valmiki Nagar lines with electrification projects.

The additional capacity will ease congestion and minimise delays. It also approved Jhansi-Manikpur and Bhimsen-Khairar lines doubling with electrification projects. Besides, the CCEA approved the Bhatni-Aurnihar line doubling with electrification project.

UGC panel to identify Eminent Institutes

University Grants Commission on 20th February constituted a four-member Empowered Expert Committee, which is being entrusted to conduct the appraisal of applications for shortlisting 20 Institutions of Eminence. N Gopalaswami, former Chief Election Commissioner of India is the Chairperson of the committee. The government is likely to announce the names of the selected institutions by April 2018.

Kamal Hassan launches new political party "Makkal Needhi Maiam"

Makkal Neethi Maiyam is the name of the political party founded by Tamil Actor Kamal Hasan who began his political sojourn from late President Dr. Abdul Kalam's house at Ramanathapuram on 21st February. At a mammoth public meeting at Madurai, the actor launched the Party 's flag.

Government to set up NITI Forum for Northeast

Government will set up the NITI Forum for Northeast to identify constraints and recommend suitable interventions for speedy and sustainable growth in the region.

Ministry of Development of North East Region (DoNER) in a release said, the forum will also review the development status in the region.

The Ministry said, the forum will be co-chaired by the Vice-Chairman of NITI Aayog Dr Rajiv Kumar and Minister for DoNER Dr Jitendra Singh.

Members of the Forum will include Secretaries of Ministries of Road Transport and Highways, Railways, Power, Water Resources, Health and Family Welfare, Human Resource Development and Environment.

Chief Secretaries of all Northeastern states will also be members of the Forum. Secretary, North East Council, Shillong will be Member Secretary.

Bilateral:

India and Indonesia Joint Military Drill 'Garuda Shakti' Begins

The **Indian** and **Indonesian** armies began the sixth edition of their annual military exercise named 'Garuda Shakti' in Bandung, Indonesia.

It is a two-week long joint Military drill.

The exercises will include experience sharing in counter-terrorism operations, close quarter combat, and other areas of special operations.

India International Textiles Expo begins in Colombo

A three –day India International Textiles Expo (IITExpo) of India began in Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on 21st February.

It is being organized by Powerloom Development & Export Promotion Council (PDEXCIL) with the support of Union Ministry of Textiles & Ministry of Commerce & Industry.

Inaugurating the event, Sri Lankan minister of Special Assignments Dr. Sarath Amunugama said that Sri Lanka sourcing of textile material from India and transforming it into apparel and garments for rest of the world, could lead to win-win situation for both the countries.

He cited the rich textile traditions in both countries and stellar contribution of textile sector to Sri Lanka's economy.

Economy:

Union Cabinet Approves Creation Of National Urban Housing Fund

The Union Cabinet approval for creation of National Urban Housing Fund (NUHF) for Rs.60,000 crores. This fund will be situated in Building Materials and Technology Promotion Council (BMTPC), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

NUHF will facilitate raising requisite funds in next four years so that flow of Central Assistance under different verticals i.e. Beneficiary Linked Construction (BLC), Affordable Housing in Partnership(AHP), In-Situ Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) and Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme (CLSS).

Govt clears opening up of commercial coal mining to Pvt firms

In a major reform in the coal sector since its nationalisation in 1973, the government on 20th February allowed private companies to mine the fossil fuel for commercial use, ending the monopoly of state-

owned Coal India Ltd. The decision was taken by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

According to the Coal Minister Piyush Goyal, the opening up of commercial coal mining for the private sector is the most ambitious coal sector reform. Currently, the private sector is allowed coal mining for captive use only.

Mr Goyal said, the reform is likely to bring efficiency into the coal sector by moving away from the era of monopoly to competition and lower power tariffs.

He said the move will lead to higher investments and create lakhs of direct and indirect jobs. He said, apart from increasing competitiveness it will allow the use of best possible technology into the sector.

The CCEA has also approved the methodology for the auction of coal mines or blocks for sale of coal under the Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015 and the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957.

Piyush Goyal said big, medium as well as small mines would be offered to private companies for mining. He said, opening up the sector will also lead to energy security through assured coal supply, accountable allocation and affordability.

The methodology gives the highest priority to transparency, ease of doing business, and ensuring that natural resources are used for national development.

Science and Technology:

India Successfully Test-Fires Agni-II Missile

India successfully test-fired Agni II medium-range nuclear-capable missile from APJ Abdul Kalam island off the Odisha coast on 20th February. The Strategic Forces Command (SFC) fired Agni-II from a mobile launcher at launch complex 4 of the Integrated Test Range.

Agni-II, which has a length of 20 meters, weighs 17 tonnes and can carry a payload of 1000 kgs over a distance of 2000 km. It is a part of the Agni series of missiles developed by the DRDO.

Environment:

Singapore imposes Carbon tax From 2019

Singapore will impose a 'carbon tax' from 2019 to cut its greenhouse gas emissions and make companies more competitive as global agreements on climate change take effect. The Singapore Finance minister Heng Swee Keat stated that the tax would be levied on all facilities producing 25,000 tonnes or more of greenhouse gas emissions a year.

The tax, to be applied to all sectors, will be Sg\$5.0 (\$3.8) per tonne of greenhouse gas emissions from 2019 to 2023.

Sports:

Norway's Bjoergen becomes most successful Winter Olympian

Norway's Marit Bjoergen became the most successful athlete in Winter Olympics history on 21st February as she took bronze in Pyeongchang, South Korea in cross country skiing's women's team sprint free. However, Kikkan Randall and Jessica Diggins won the gold and the first Olympic cross country title for the United States.

Bjoergen's bronze with Maiken Caspersen Falla put her on 14 Olympic medals, outstripping fellow Norwegian Ole Einar Bjoerndalen who has 13 in biathlon. 37 year old Bjoergen is also the second most successful woman at either the Summer or Winter Games, trailing only Soviet gymnast Larisa Latynina who compiled 18 medals.

Persons in news:

Avani Chaturvedi: Flying officer Avani Chaturvedi has scripted history by becoming the first Indian woman to fly a fighter aircraft solo.

An Indian Air Force official said, she flew a MiG-21 bison in her first solo sortie from IAF's Jamnagar base in Gujarat on 19th February. She is one of the three in the first batch of female pilots, besides Bhawana Kanth and Mohana Singh, who were inducted in Indian Air Force fighter squadron in 2016.

They were commissioned as flying officers after the government took the decision in 2015 to open the fighter stream for women on an experimental basis in

Three women pilots had undergone strenuous training programme to fly fighter jets. The IAF has already selected the next batch of three women trainee pilots for the fighter stream.