

## Hitting bull's-eye with anti-airgun initiative

Minister Mama Natung's 'Airgun Surrender Abhiyan' and call for going back to old-style hunting have received backing of tribes in Arunachal



**Reverse sermon:** An airgun surrender ceremony being held in Arunachal Pradesh. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**Rahul Karmakar**  
GUWAHATI

**H**ow do you stop people from hunting? By advising them to hunt.

In March 2021, Arunachal Environment, Forest, and Climate Change Minister Mama Natung made an impromptu announcement in the 60-member State Assembly that he would wean people away from hunting "rare animals and birds getting rarer by the day".

For a second, he thought he had made a mistake. Stopping people from hunting – a tradition for many among the 140 tribes and sub-tribes across the 83,743-sq. km State with about 80% forest cover – was easier said than done. My mind said it was impossible but my heart said otherwise. Then and there in the House, I decided to launch an airgun surrender programme from my village Lamdang," Mr. Natung told *The Hindu*. He knew asking people not to hunt would be counter-productive. He advised them to maintain the tradition, but in the old style – with bows and arrows or any other weapon their forefathers used.

"With a bow and arrow, a hunter can at most kill six birds and animals in a year. But an airgun makes him hunt 200 or more animals in a day, and that needed to stop because we have been losing our fauna, many not found anywhere else on earth," he said.

The 'reverse sermon' worked. About a week after his announcement in the Assembly, villagers of Lamdang gave up 46 airguns. The Airgun Surrender Abhiyan, recognised at the UNESCO's International

Conference on Biosphere Reserves in Malaysia in November this year, took off. Almost 21 months later, a total of 2,467 airguns have been handed over to the State's Forest Department.

### Tip of the iceberg

"I know it is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many, many more airguns and other firearms still in the possession of people across Arunachal Pradesh, but at least we have made a start," Mr. Natung said.

The anti-airgun movement entailed travel for the Minister and Forest officials. During several such tours, villagers were apprehensive about not having enough "good food" to eat if they gave up bushmeat. "I kept telling them their fears were unfounded because alternative meats are available in the markets these days, even in far-flung areas, thanks to the Pema Khandu government's push for poultry, piggery, and other farm initiatives," he said.

Mr. Natung and his team also went about explaining how the birds and animals provide them with agricultural services and help them exist. Before long, people began organising airgun surrender ceremonies locally. In central Arunachal Pradesh's Pasighat area, for instance, some villagers shunned airguns after realising pests had taken over their paddy fields because the birds, their nemesis, had been hunted out.

In Lamdang and adjoining areas, the chirps of birds and the squeaks, barks, and howls of animals have virtually replaced the gunshots. "It feels like the good old days," Radhe Natung, a local resident said.

# Vessel with 20 Indians on board hit by drone in the Arabian Sea; Navy, Coast Guard step in

**Dinakar Peri**  
**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

In what could be the crisis in the Red Sea spilling close to Indian waters, a Liberia-flagged merchant vessel, *Chem Pluto*, was hit by a suspected drone on Saturday just outside the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Coast Guard and the Navy swung into action to assist the vessel that suffered significant damage, though the crew were reported safe. The vessel is now heading towards Mumbai.

The ship with 21 crew

members – 20 Indians and one Vietnamese national – was located around 217 nautical miles from the Porbandar coast in the Arabian Sea when it was hit.

## 'Damage assessment'

"The vessel has started making its way towards Mumbai post undertaking damage assessment and repairs on its power generation systems. The vessel is likely to enter Mumbai and has sought escort assistance due to steering issues. *ICGS Vikram* will be escorting the ship during its passage," Commandant Niranjana Pratap Singh, PRO, Indian Coast Guard,



A photo of *Chem Pluto* taken by a surveillance aircraft of the Coast Guard after a suspected drone attack on Saturday. ICG

said in a statement. Earlier in the day, the Coast Guard directed *ICGS Vikram*, which was on deployment in the Indian EEZ, towards the merchant vessel. The

Liberian-flagged tanker was moving from Saudi Arabia to Mangaluru with crude, as per marine tracking portals. A Coast Guard Dornier aircraft reached

the location for visual inspection and established communication with *Chem Pluto*, Commandant Singh said. The Navy too dispatched a maritime patrol aircraft which arrived overhead the merchant vessel and ascertained the safety of the crew. "A warship has also been despatched to provide any assistance as required," a Navy official said in the day giving an update on the situation.

*Chem Pluto* reportedly commenced its voyage from the UAE on December 19 and was scheduled to arrive at the New Mangalore Port on December 25, the Coast Guard stated.



# Cash transfers help Bengal women take financial decisions, says study

But issues such as child marriage, domestic violence require special attention, says the Pratichi Trust study; it says 85.55% of women say they decide on spending the money; the State gives ₹1,000 to women from SC/ST group and ₹500 to others

**Shiv Sahay Singh**  
KOLKATA

A study by Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust on *Lakshmir Bhandar*, one of the flagship schemes of the West Bengal government, points out that the cash incentives have increased the women beneficiary's ability to make financial decisions and position in the family, but larger issues of child marriage and domestic violence require special attention.

"From the gender perspective, although issues of security, dignity, and freedom of choice for women are being addressed to a certain extent through *Lakshmir Bhandar*, larger background realities like child marriage, and domestic violence still need special attention," the report by Pratichi Trust said.

The study published recently pointed out that 85.55% of women report that they decide how to spend the money themselves, followed by joint decision-making with their husbands at 10.76%.

Another interesting figure that the study points out is that the majority of the respondents report that their position in their family is enhanced due to *Lakshmir Bhandar* (Yes=61.07%, No=38.93%). The picture across social



**Women empowerment:** A tableau showcasing the features of the *Lakshmir Bhandar* scheme during the Republic Day celebration in Kolkata in 2023. DEBASISH BHADURI

groups is also mostly equitable (though the perception of STs might demand more probing).

*Lakshmir Bhandar*, a flagship programme to provide financial assistance to women from economically weaker sections of society in the 25-60 age group, provides ₹1,000 every month to women from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households and ₹500 a month for other categories. The scheme was announced by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in February 2021 during the the Assembly election campaign. The West Bengal government annually spends over ₹15,000 crore on the scheme and the

number of beneficiaries has increased to about 2 crore.

The study published recently points out that from the "policy point of view, it is important to ensure that there is conversation and awareness regarding the conflicting realities of domestic violence, child marriage and gender-based discrimination on the one hand and the benefits or freedom that accrue to women as a result of direct cash transfer programmes on the other".

**Child marriage an issue**  
Despite schemes such as *Lakshmir Bhandar* and *Kanyashree* (scheme providing cash incentives for

school-going girls) child marriage continues to be a challenge for the policy makers in West Bengal.

In its report, the researchers of the Pratichi Trust have pointed out that *Lakshmir Bhandar* has presented before women of "modest background considerable promises for making a difference to their quotidian lives". The study emphasised that entitlement, however, small but regular and steady has a multiplier effect on the lives of the beneficiaries.

"How 'small' an amount is may not be measured only in terms of its quantity, but also with respect to its qualitative potential. One indication of this far-

reaching potential of the scheme that we have gleaned from the grassroots is that some of the recipients talk about their entitlements to both welfare and workfare," the publication added.

Sabir Ahamed, national research coordinator of Pratichi Trust, who has been part of the study said that recommendations on the study include that women from similar economically deprived backgrounds particularly those from the OBC category and Muslims be treated at par with SC/ST category as far as the cash entitlement is concerned.

Mr. Ahamed also added that there should be an attempt to enhance ST participation in the scheme.

"Primary survey shows that the enrolment of STs in this scheme is still low in comparison to the proportion of their population. Concerted efforts need to be taken to augment their participation. *Duare Sarkar* outreach programmes may be arranged in tribal settlements to address the issue of their spatial isolation," the study points out.

The trust set up by Mr. Sen has held studies and come up with reports on *Duare Sarkar* (an outreach programme of the West Bengal government) and the grievance redressal cell of the State government.

## T.N. study says caste bias among students most rampant in Cuddalore district

**The Hindu Bureau**  
CHENNAI

Cuddalore district accounts for most number of schools where students practise caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu, shows a survey conducted by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF).

The survey, 'Caste discrimination in schools', found that students at schools in nearly 13 districts nurtured caste pride and indulged in caste-based talk. The TNUEF also suggested solutions and submitted them to the Chief Minister. The second on the list is Madurai, as the rural parts of the district practised caste discrimination at schools.

Publishing the results of the survey in Chennai on Saturday, TNUEF State secretary K. Samuel Raj said many schools refused to employ Scheduled Caste cooks.

The Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front survey was conducted in 36 districts.

It posed 78 questions to students of 321 government schools, 58 government-aided schools and 62 private schools.

### Discrimination in bus

The survey says caste conflicts among students at over 25 schools were brought to the attention of the school authorities. In Thenni, students faced discrimination while travelling by bus to schools.

The survey says that students of schools in north Chennai indulged in caste-based teasing and slurs and talking ill of certain castes.

Students in 33 schools

The survey report says students of schools in north Chennai indulged in caste-based teasing and slurs and talking ill of certain castes

wore caste markers such as threads, bindi, tokens, and photos to denote their caste.

"So far, caste threads were heard of, but new markers have surfaced," Mr. Samuel Raj said.

### Influence of movies

As for the caste influence of cinema on people, he said, "Many [films] were known to portray a particular actor's character, or the actor itself, with casteist remarks on their shirts, under-shirts or vehicles."

Women students in six districts felt threatened and unsafe in their classrooms, while students in three districts have been sexually harassed, the survey found.

The report also showed that casteism was rampant among teachers, too, in salary, classrooms, and playgrounds.

"A comprehensive document on equality guidance has to be published by the government. Additionally, teachers and staff members must undergo training, and changes have to be made to the curriculum," Mr. Samuel Raj said.

The Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front urged the government to implement its solutions within a month.

"We will publish the school names, if action isn't taken," its members warned.



## Will new telecom Bill streamline the sector?

How does the government plan to consolidate the law for wireless networks and Internet service providers? Has the licensing procedure been eased for telecom operators? What are industry players saying? What are the concerns raised by digital rights groups?

**Jagriti Chandra**

**The story so far:**

**T**he Telecommunications Bill, 2023, was passed in Parliament this week. When it receives the assent of the President, the Bill will replace three archaic laws such as the Telegraph Act of 1885, the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933 and the Telegraph Wires (Unlawful Possession) Act, 1950. It aims to consolidate the law for wireless networks and Internet service providers, and simplify the process of application for licences and permits for telecom operators.

**What is the Telecommunications Bill, 2023?**

The Bill governs authorisation of telecommunication networks and services, provides for auctioning as well as administrative allocation of spectrum, defines the mechanism for exercising the right of way for laying telecom infrastructure such as cables in public as well as private property. It also spells out emergency measures the government can take in the interest of national security and public safety such as intercept messages, suspend telecommunication services as well as take temporary possession of any telecommunication service or network. The Bill also states that rules will be framed to protect consumers with the setting up of a 'Do Not Disturb' register to ensure they don't receive a specified class of messages without prior consent.

The Bill governs a whole host of services, including over-the-top services such as WhatsApp, Telegram and email services like Gmail through a broad definition for 'telecommunication' which is given as "transmission, emission or reception of any

'Interception of messages will enable indiscriminate surveillance and weaken online safety'

messages, by wire, radio, optical or other electro-magnetic systems, whether or not such messages have been subjected to rearrangement, computation or other processes by any means in the course of their transmission, emission or reception." This vast definition entails that every internet app within India has to comply with the law. The Bill also marks a shift from a licensing regime to an authorisation regime, where all telecommunication services in India "shall obtain an authorisation from the Central Government, subject to such terms and conditions, including fees or charges, as may be prescribed." Anyone who offers a service without authorisation will face an imprisonment of up to three years, or a fine of up to ₹2 crore.

The Bill allows the government to assign spectrum for telecommunication through auction except for entities listed in the First Schedule for which assignment will be done by administrative process. The First Schedule includes entities engaged in national security, defence, law enforcement and crime prevention, public broadcasting services, disaster management, promoting scientific research and exploration, as well as Global Mobile Personal Communication by Satellites such as Space X, and Bharti Airtel-backed OneWeb, which had been pushing for administrative allocation.

**What are the concerns over the Bill?**

According to critics, the new Telecommunications Bill, 2023, is draconian and provides a legal architecture for mass surveillance and internet shutdowns. Among its several contentious clauses is the requirement that all users have to be identified through the use of "verifiable biometric based identification as may be prescribed" by telecommunication service providers. Further, it requires that no user shall furnish any false particulars or suppress material information. This could impede whistle-blowers as well as journalists who operate under anonymity. If users fail to comply, they will be charged a hefty penalty from ₹25,000 to ₹1,00,000 for some provisions.

Most of the contentious provisions are contained in Chapter IV, which grants emergency powers to the Central government in the interest of public safety and national security. Section 19 (f) empowers the Central government to notify "standards and conformity assessment measures" in respect of encryption and data processing in telecommunication, which has raised eyebrows given that most internet communication is increasingly being pushed towards encryption to evade national

state surveillance programmes. The government's interest in breaking up encryption of WhatsApp and Signal has to be seen in the backdrop of a controversy over Israeli company NSO Group's Pegasus spyware targeting 300 mobile phone numbers for illegal surveillance, including those of serving Ministers in the Narendra Modi government, Opposition leaders, lawyers, activists and journalists.

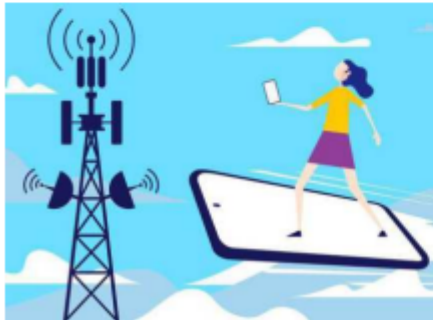
It also allows the Central or a State government during a public emergency, including disaster management, and in the interest of public safety to take "temporary possession of any telecommunication service or network". It can take over control and management of such services or networks. It can intercept messages on the pretext of "preventing incitement to the commission of any offence", and direct suspension of telecommunication services in such circumstances like the shutdown of Internet seen in Manipur and Jammu and Kashmir.

**How has the industry received the Bill?**

The Digital Infrastructure Providers Association (DIPA) and the Cellular Operators' Association of India have welcomed the provisions in the Bill that bring uniformity across States in terms of 'right of way' rules and regulations, along with rates. These, they say, will also address long-standing issues for telecom infrastructure providers, including capping of charges, and deployment of telecom infrastructure on private property. The telecommunication network is not considered part of the property for transactions or tax purposes, and hence the Bill is also welcomed for providing relief to the infrastructure industry from the additional exorbitant tax burden.

The Indian Space Association has thanked the government for including satellite-based communication networks for allocation of spectrum by administrative method. It says that the move will "help spur growth in the nascent space sector... and also help drive innovation, create opportunities for start-ups, and strengthen the country's position in the global satellite market." But an international group of organisations and experts such as the Signal Foundation, the Internet Freedom Foundation and the Internet Press Institute have written to Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and underlined that interception of message will enable "indiscriminate surveillance" and weaken online safety. The groups say that the Bill creates uncertainties around the ability of service providers to offer strong encryption, and develop privacy-respecting innovations.

The authority to suspend the internet has been granted without dwelling over procedural safeguards recommended by the Supreme Court as well as the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information and Technology. The groups have, therefore, demanded that the Bill be withdrawn in its current form.



GETTY IMAGES

EVASTALIN

## What's the latest blip in India-Maldives ties?

Why has the government of Mohamed Muizzu decided against renewing a hydrographic survey agreement with India? What are the implications, coming soon after a pledge to send back Indian troops stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago?

Meera Srinivasan

### The story so far:

**E**arlier this month, the Maldives Cabinet decided against renewing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India for cooperation in hydrography. The agreement, which was signed in 2019, is due to expire in 2024. Coming soon after newly elected President Mohamed Muizzu's pledge to send back Indian troops currently stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago, the move was yet another indication of his government's intention to reverse the former Ibrahim Mohamed Solih administration's 'India first' policy.

### What is hydrography?

It is the science of studying oceans, seas, and other water bodies, by compiling and analysing data, maps, and charts. Branching off from applied sciences, it looks at measuring and describing the physical attributes of water bodies and predicting how they might change over time. While it is said to be undertaken primarily for safety of navigation, it also supports other activities, such as economic development, security and defence, scientific research, and environmental protection. Hydrographical measurements include tidal,

Going by recent events, it appears as if New Delhi will have to brace for a challenging phase of its Male partnership

current and wave information.

### What is India's expertise?

India has been an active member of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) since 1955. The Indian Naval Hydrographic Department (INHD) was established in 1874 in Kolkata. It is the nodal agency for hydrographic surveys and has a fleet of indigenously built modern survey ships. India partners with many countries in the Indian Ocean Region and African and East Asian countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Tanzania, Maldives, Mozambique, Vietnam, Myanmar, Kenya, and Sri Lanka. According to the INHD, its role has broadened over time, owing to the heightening global character of hydrography and "its growing potential as a force multiplier" in terms of maritime diplomacy. Personnel from 39 countries have trained at the National Institute of Hydrography, functioning under the INHD.

### Why was the 2019 MoU significant?

The MoU was signed in June 2019, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the Maldives. It was Mr. Modi's second visit to the Maldives since he participated at President Solih's swearing-in ceremony in 2018. Months before the time the MoU was inked, President Solih and the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) had secured a landslide win in the general elections. The two Indian Ocean neighbours, and their leaders, backed by a decisive majority, committed to close cooperation in development, defence and maritime security. The first meeting of the Joint Commission on Hydrography was held in the Maldives in September 2019. Following the agreement, the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Indian Navy have carried out three joint hydrographic surveys in 2021, 2022, and 2023.

### Why has the Cabinet decided against renewing the agreement?

While President Muizzu has not made a statement specifically on the MoU on the joint hydrographic survey, a senior official told Maldivian media that the decision was aligned to the current administration's pledge to terminate

all agreements with foreign parties that are detrimental to or endanger the national security of the Maldives. "It is in the best interest of Maldivian sovereignty that this capacity is improved within our own military, entrusting them with the responsibilities of surveilling and policing our waters, and excluding the participation of any foreign party in such an endeavour," Under Secretary for Public Policy Mohamed Firzul told a media conference.

The message appeared to be in line with Mr. Muizzu's broad election campaign, pledging to remove Indian troops from the country and "restoring the Maldives's sovereignty". Once he assumed charge, the core demand of the 'India Out' campaign led by former President Abdulla Yameen, found mention in President Muizzu's first set of official announcements.

### How has India responded?

In its first response yet to the Cabinet decision, the Ministry of External Affairs on Thursday said India had a "proven track record" in the field. "Let me just say that India has a proven track record in the field of hydrography. And we have also been cooperating with many countries in the Indian Ocean region on hydrography and various elements related to that. The benefits to partner countries are visible, I would like to just leave it at that," spokesperson Arindam Bagchi told the weekly media conference.

### What does this mean for India-Maldives ties?

Going by recent developments, it appears as if New Delhi will have to brace for a challenging phase of its Male partnership. Maldives is a member of the Colombo Security Conclave, an initiative aimed at enhancing Indian Ocean maritime security, that includes India, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. However, earlier this month, the Maldives skipped the latest round of the Conclave's NSA-level meet held in Mauritius. Notably, it coincided with Maldivian Vice-President Hussain Mohamed Latheef's visit to China, to attend the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, where he said the Maldives was "eager to explore novel avenues of collaboration and cooperation with China". The MEA's response to the termination of the Maldives's joint hydrographic initiative with India, pointed to New Delhi's belief that its neighbours should tap the "benefits" of India's expertise. How it will navigate the choppy waters connecting its southern neighbour will be closely watched.



**Tense relations:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the President of the Maldives Mohamed Muizzu during COP-28, in UAE, on December 1. PTI



## The rebel who became the ruler

**Sheikh Hasina**

A former tough opposition leader who fought Ershad's military regime in the 1980s, the Awami League chief who is seeking to extend her rule for another five years is facing the heat as Opposition parties have threatened to boycott the elections citing government interference in the process

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**

**I**n April 30, 1991, a cyclone hit the coastal Bangladesh with monstrous ferocity. Storm surges drove seawater deep inland. At the end of the nearly seven-hour-long cyclone, at least 1,40,000 people were left dead. Sheikh Hasina, then the leader of the principal opposition Awami League, reached the affected areas near Chittagong before the Government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) could muster any response. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia should take moral responsibility for failing to provide timely assistance to the people and resign immediately, Ms. Hasina demanded. The images of Ms. Hasina walking on the devastated landmass of coastal Bangladesh drove her into the centre of a grieving nation. The BNP sensed a growing threat, and violent attacks targeted Ms. Hasina in the following months.

Earlier, on November 10, 1987, the police of military ruler Mohammed Ershad had targeted her, which killed three of her young colleagues from the student wing of the Awami League. Sensing that a deeply unpopular and confused military dictator was failing in governance, Ms. Hasina and Ms. Zia came together in 1987. The two were known to be opposed to each other. Yet, they formed an alliance, asking for genuine democracy. In the winter of 1990, the Hasina-Zia duo mobilised lakhs of people in Dhaka, shaking the foundations of Ershad's regime. Ershad responded by declaring emergency, but in the face of mounting pressure, he resigned on December 4. In the February 1991 election, the BNP came to power, and Ms. Hasina emerged as the main opposition leader. The cyclone of April that year gave Ms. Hasina the political rebirth that she wanted.

Long before the 1991 cyclone, the coastal part of the country was devastated in the winter of 1970 by cyclone 'Bhola'. For days, the government of Yahya Khan, sitting in a distant Islamabad, did not know the scale of the devastation. The apathy of the Yahya Khan government was matched by the brutality of Operation Searchlight that was launched by the

Pakistani military to crush the democratic aspirations of the winner of general election – the Awami League, under Sheikh Mujib, her father. The Awami League, which took power after the birth of Bangladesh following the India-Pakistan war of 1971, represented the young and restless youth of East Pakistan.

When Mujib was assassinated on August 15, 1975, Ms. Hasina was in West Germany. She and her sister Rehana survived the massacre that wiped out their entire family, including their five-year-old brother Sheikh Russell. After the killings, Ms. Hasina took refuge in India for six years. This was the formative period of the future Prime Minister. In this phase, Ms. Hasina struck a friendship with Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee and the Gandhis of India.

On May 17, 1981, Ms. Hasina returned to Bangladesh. By then, the Awami League had elected her in absentia as its general secretary. The battle against the Ershad regime was tough and the battle against the Zia government was no less. Ms. Zia, widow of former military ruler Zia-ur Rahman who founded the BNP, tried to corner Ms. Hasina as attacks continued. But the Zia government could not recover from the blow of the cyclone and the BNP was defeated in the election of 1996, paving the way for the first term of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The rebel became the ruler.

**Agreement with India**

In 1997, Ms. Hasina concluded the 30-year Ganga Water Sharing Agreement with India that was to last till 2026. She also announced the plan for building the ambitious bridge across the Padma in this tenure. She reached out to the Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tract and concluded a peace treaty on December 2, 1997 with the Parbaty Chittogram Jana Samhati Samiti. Despite striking several right notes, Ms. Hasina lost the 2001 election that was held under a caretaker government, to a four-party alliance led by the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party (Manju) and Islamic Oikyo Jote.

The BNP-led government became known subsequently for the alleged support that it provided to the



secessionist forces like the ULFA and other groups in India's Northeast.

Rampant corruption and public protests crippled the country.

A new Caretaker Government came in January 2007 with support from the military, which imposed emergency and postponed the elections. During this time, Ms. Hasina was jailed on corruption charges which helped her gain public sympathy. The election held on December 29, 2008 returned her to power. This time, she returned to take advantage of her partnership with India and reached an in-principle agreement on Teesta water sharing and started negotiations and survey for

the historic Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with India.

In February 2013, the trial of Abdul Quader Mollah reignited the painful memories of the genocide committed during March-December 1971 under the supervision of the Pakistani military. The powerful Shahbagh movement that started in February 2013 demanded death sentence for Mollah, who had earlier got a life sentence. In December that year, Mollah was hanged. Ms. Hasina returned to power in 2014 in an election that was boycotted by the BNP. Unfazed, Ms. Hasina next year sealed the LBA with India.

Continuing with the Shahbagh spirit, her government kept up the heat on the collaborators in the genocide and hanged a number of leaders, including Motiur Rahman Nizami and Mir Quasem Ali of Jamaat-e-Islami in 2016. That year, extremism posed the toughest challenge to Hasina with the Islamic State attack on the Holy Artisan Bakery of Dhaka. She vowed to continue her campaign against terrorists which became synonymous with her rule. A tough fighter who had taken on a military dictator in the 1980s, she had by now become a grandmother and acquired a front rank as one of the longest ruling female leaders in the world.

**Election controversy**

There has been no indications from the party so far about who might succeed Ms. Hasina. Her son Sajeeb Wazed Joy, an entrepreneur, and daughter Saima Wazed, have both hit the headlines. Ms. Saima recently became the South East Asia Regional Director of the World Health Organization, prompting criticism of nepotism. However, for the veteran leader, succession is not yet a priority. The coming election is already in international focus as the BNP has planned to boycott the polls once again. Ms. Hasina has maintained that there will not be the repeat of the past caretaker governments as that provision in the Constitution has been removed. The BNP, however, demands a "neutral government" before polling.

As global pressure mounts on her, Bangladesh is all set to hold the election on January 7. Ms. Hasina has sent emissaries abroad to invite observers and diplomats and promised a fair contest. Despite her assurances, around 14 parties, including the BNP, are boycotting the election. With the completed Padma bridge, and a series of new airports and roadways, Ms. Hasina showcases her achievements while seeking re-election, though there is economic stress and criticism of a widening crackdown on the opposition. It remains to be seen if Ms. Hasina, the former rebel, would be willing to test her popularity in the ring of a truly "free and fair election" and convince the opposition to join the race at the last moment.

**THE GIST**

When Sheikh Mujib was assassinated on August 15, 1975, Hasina was in West Germany. Later, she took refuge in India for six years

On May 17, 1981, Hasina returned to Bangladesh. By then, the Awami League had elected her in absentia as its General Secretary

In 1990, she joined hands with her political rival Khaleda Zia to mobilise mass protests against Ershad's regime and eventually forced the dictator to resign

In 1996, the Awami League defeated the BNP in general elections, paving the way for the first term of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

# India's \$60 billion man-made textile sector reels from Chinese imports glut

Rising imports of MMF fabric and higher domestic prices of fibres are severely impacting local spinners, knitters, weavers and processors as they are unable to supply at competitive prices; the brunt of the impact has been on manufacturers, both for the domestic market and export-oriented units

**M. Soundariya Preetha**  
COIMBATORE

For almost a year now, India's major textile hubs of Ludhiana, Surat, and Erode have been fighting an almost insurmountable challenge: rising imports, or arguably large-scale dumping, of man-made fibre (MMF) fabrics that is affecting a sector valued at about \$60 billion.

Rajesh Bansal, a fabric processor in Ludhiana, took his friends from Nagpur recently to a retail outlet to buy fleece. "Of the six pieces shown to us, four were from China," he says.

"China dumps fabric and this creates problems," asserts Ashok Jirawala, president of the Federation of Gujarat Weavers Association. "We ran our weaving units to full capacity and now we have unsold stocks. So, we plan to cut production by 20%."

C. Jaganathan, who weaves fabrics in Erode, imports viscose yarn from China. "When the prices were ₹180 a kg for Indian yarn, I got it for ₹125 a kg from China. Only for the last one month Chinese prices are higher. The Chinese sellers are now offering the current price for a year," he observes.

In the last three years, MMF fabric imports, which attract mostly 20% duty, have doubled and most of it is knitted synthetic fa-

brics, contends R.K. Vij, secretary general of the Polyester Textile Apparel Industry Association.

According to data shared by Mr. Vij, in 2019-2020 (April to March), about 325 tonnes of fabric were imported every day from China at \$4.61 a kg. The volume increased to 887 tonnes a day in the April-June quarter of this fiscal and the average value was about \$2.90 a kg. Of this, value of knitted or crocheted dyed fabrics made of synthetic fibre was just \$1.4 (about ₹118) a kg.

It is not just imports, but "under invoicing of imported finished fabrics that is a major issue," notes Mr. Vij. "The government should issue a notice to Customs, stopping clearance of fabrics that are priced below a certain value at the ports," he urges.

Rising import of MMF fabric and relatively higher domestic prices of MMF fibres are severely impacting local spinners, knitters, weavers and processors as they are unable to supply at competitive prices. This has hit both, the local and export manufacturers, and the downstream industry is said to be operating at only 70% capacity.

Quick trade estimates for November from the Confederation of Indian Textile Industry (CITI) show that export of man-made yarn, fabrics, and made-ups were 7.33% low-



**Fraying finances:** Buyers have reduced prices by ₹2-₹5 a metre in the last one year, says a loom owner in Palladam. THE HINDU

er year-on-year. For April-November, the decline was 23.2%.

In 2017-18, fabrics dominated India's total MMF exports with 33% share, while yarn made up 32%, as per a study on the Ministry of Textiles website. India's share in global MMF trade was 2.7% in 2019.

"Indian textiles is predominantly cotton based," says a Tamil Nadu-based viscose products producer, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We could not bring much innovation in MMF products. China, Thailand, Korea have been the innovators," he adds.

"We were out-priced on the raw material front for the last 15 years. We do small value additions. With

the China + 1 strategy, there is a big push from western brands but we do not have the capabilities. China is the biggest player in MMF. It is desperate to sell its raw material at any cost as its customers are looking at other countries for sourcing it. China determines the international prices."

The viscose products producer says, given China's dominance, India's introduction of Quality Control Orders (QCOs) on MMF fibres is severely impacting the entire value chain.

The government has introduced QCOs on polyester raw materials, polyester fibre and yarn, and viscose fibre, making Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) certification manda-

tory for these products, even if they are imported.

**'QCOs killing industry'**

"The QCOs are killing the industry," says Rakesh Mehra, Chairman, CITI. "The government should have started with QCOs for garments. That is left open [for imports] and it has introduced QCOs for fibre. This has led to fibre prices going up. What should be of good quality is what touches the skin. But, that [garment and fabrics] is imported without any quality control. One has to do a deep study on the prices and imports. The industry is for QCOs and good quality. But, it should be introduced first at the garment stage," adds Mr. Mehra.

And, this is a view echoed by most of the MMF players that *The Hindu* spoke to.

Any textile mill that produces MMF yarn (polyester or viscose) should get the yarn tested for BIS standards. "How can a small-scale mill spend lakhs on testing," asks a small-scale textile mill owner, speaking on condition of anonymity. "It should not be mandatory at the yarn stage," he adds.

By extension, the QCOs on fibre imports is denying the market of high quality fabrics.

A viscose yarn producer says a garment exporter in Tiruppur showed a sample

that he claimed was a branded speciality fabric. On closer examination, it turned out to be a blend of nylon and viscose. "No one really checks. The sellers are using brand names to push any type of blended fabric into the market," adds the yarn producer, who does not wish to be identified.

**MSMEs on edge**

Almost a year of declining orders and high prices have put MSME units' finances on edge.

"I weave rayon fabric and sell it to local traders who sell in the north Indian markets," says Aruchamy, a weaver in Palladam who operates automated looms. "The buyers have reduced the prices by ₹2 to ₹5 a metre in the last one year. For every three looms, there should be one worker. I now have one person to man five looms. A fitter asks for ₹30,000 a month as salary. I cannot afford it. This affects the quality of the fabric," he adds.

"I used to pay ₹4 lakh a month as electricity charges for the auto looms unit," says Mr. Jaganathan. "That has increased to ₹6 lakh now. Similarly, labour costs have shot up too. In Erode, auto loom units should pay almost ₹1,000 a day to a worker," he adds.

(This is the third of a four-part series. Full report at: <https://bit.ly/48uGmsG>)