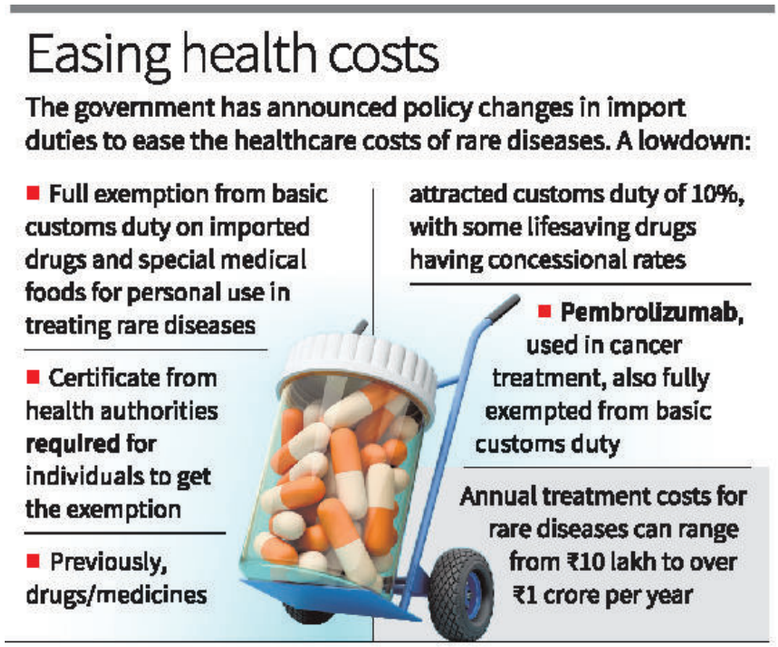
DRUGS FOR RARE DISEASES GET CUSTOMS DUTY RELIEF



Centre issues waiver to offer substantial cost savings for those in need of such treatments; pembrolizumab (Keytruda) used in treatment of various cancers also gets the same concession

All drugs and food for special medical purposes imported for personal use for treatment of all rare diseases listed under the National Policy for Rare Diseases, 2021 are now fully exempted from basic customs duty, the Union government declared through a general exemption notification. The waiver will come into effect from Saturday.

The Centre has also fully exempted pembrolizumab (Keytruda), used in treatment of various cancers, from basic customs duty.

In order to get this exemption, the individual importer has to produce a certificate from the Central or State Director of Health Services or District Medical Officer/-Civil Surgeon of the district.

Drugs/medicines generally attract basic customs duty of 10%, while some categories of life-saving drugs/vaccines attract concessional rate of 5% or nil. According to a government release, while exemptions are already in place for certain drugs for treatment of spinal muscular atrophy or Duchenne muscular dystrophy, it has been receiving many representations seeking customs duty relief for drugs and medicines used in treatment of other rare diseases.

Drugs or special foods required for the treatment of these diseases are expensive and often need to be imported. Food for special medical purposes is a food formulation intended to provide nutritional support to persons who suffer from a specific disease, disorder or condition.

It is estimated that for a child weighing 10 kg, the annual cost of treatment for some rare diseases may vary from ₹10 lakh to over ₹1 crore per year, with treatment being lifelong and drug dose and cost increasing with age and weight. This exemption will result in substantial cost savings and provide much-needed relief to the patients, said the release.

CHINA'S NEW DEFENCE MINISTER LIKELY TO VISIT INDIA FOR SCO MEET IN APRIL

China's newly appointed Defence Minister, General Li Shangfu, is set to make his first visit to India in April, which will be the first high-level military visit from China since the Line of Actual Control (LAC) crisis began in April 2020.

Separately, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, speaking at an event on Thursday, said that resolution of the stand-off in eastern Ladakh "is work in progress" and in the past three years, the combination of military and diplomacy working in lockstep has made progress in resolving it.

General Li, also a State Councillor, is likely to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' meet in April in person. Chinese Minister of Public Security and State Councillor Wang Xiaohong only participated virtually in the SCO National Security Advisers' meeting held this week.

India and China are also exploring holding a bilateral meeting between the two Defence Ministers during the visit, which will be the first since a meeting between Rajnath Singh and General Li's predecessor, General Wei Fenghe, on the sidelines of the SCO Defence Ministers' meeting in Moscow in September 2020.

General Li is the first of China's Defence Ministers to come from the aerospace sector, and has served in the PLA's equipment development department. He was sanctioned by the U.S. over China's purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia. His appointment by President Xi Jinping underlines the current focus on PLA modernisation.

PLA Senior Colonel Tan Kefei, spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defence, at a monthly press briefing in Beijing on Thursday said that a working group from the Ministry "recently visited India to participate in meetings among the international military cooperation departments under the Defence

General Li Shangfu was appointed as China's Defence Minister earlier this month.
REUTERS

General Li Shangfu is expected to hold bilateral talks with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar; this will be the first such meeting after Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and General Wei Fenghe held discussions in Moscow in September 2020

Ministries of SCO member states."

During these meetings, the Chinese delegates had close and extensive communication with other participants, which profoundly enhanced the mutual trust and coordination among the parties, the spokesperson said.

"In the next stage, China is willing to cooperate with defence departments and militaries of all SCO member states to vigorously promote the 'Shanghai Spirit', continue to accelerate practical cooperation in high-level exchanges, education and training, military inspections and other fields, thus contributing to building a closer SCO community with a shared future," he added.

Speaking at the News 18 'Rising India' summit Mr. Jaishankar said that the resolution of the stand-off is still "unfinished" work. "There are places where we have forward deployments. We continue to work at it," he stated.

He said that in the past two or three years, the military has done what the military should do and the military and diplomacy have worked in lockstep. "The military commanders and diplomats work as a team... This combo of military and diplomacy working in lockstep has made progress," the Minister said, adding that ey had not been able to sort everything out, but would keep at it.

DISINVESTMENT FACING MANY CHALLENGES: GOVT.

The Finance Ministry, which last month pared the disinvestment target for 2023-24 to a nine-year low of ₹51,000 crore, has now publicly acknowledged the multiple challenges it is facing in privatising public sector enterprises (PSEs) and raising funds through minority stake sales, a drive that has stalled since Air India's sale.

Outlining the key obstacles, the Ministry noted that the COVID-19 pandemic seriously impacted transactions in 2020 and 2021, followed by the Ukraine conflict last year, which hurt minority as well as strategic stake sales as "financial capacity and risk-reward options of potential bidders turned worse".

Also, "strategic disinvestment transactions have to deal with matters such as resolving land title, lease and land use issues with State government authorities, disposal of non-core assets, excess manpower and labour unions, protection of process and functionaries etc.," the Ministry noted in its annual report for 2022-23.

Multiple court cases filed by employees' unions and other interest groups against the disinvestment policy as well as specific transactions were also hindering deals. "Any of these issues may impact the transaction timeline," the Ministry pointed out.

"Challenges to disinvestment through minority stake sale include reduced availability of government stake over 51% for large listed central PSEs; relatively muted perception of investors in these stocks as compared to private sector peers; price overhang in the market due to high disinvestment target and frequent use of exchange traded funds (ETF) route for stake sale till 2019-20," it added.

'Frequent use of ETFs'

Between 2016-17 and 2019-20, the government had raised almost ₹99,000 crore from ETFs with underlying shares of CPSEs.

Disinvestment receipts so far this year amount to just ₹35,282 crore, against a Budget target of ₹65,000 crore and revised estimates of ₹50,000 crore. The privatisation of Central Electronics and Pawan Hans had to be scrapped after being announced, owing to legal concerns about the winning bidders.

The sole strategic sale completed in FY23 is of Neelachal Ispat Nigam Ltd. (NINL) to a Tata group firm. NINL was a joint venture between four CPSEs and two State PSEs from Odisha, with no direct Government of India holding.

GPT-4 — A SHIFT FROM 'WHAT IT CAN DO' TO 'WHAT IT AUGURS'

Jitesh Seth is a data scientist at DeepTek, researching the effectiveness of AI in radiology

Do you want help to prepare for the bar examination, plan a birthday party, or even translate Ukrainian to Punjabi? A single artificial intelligence (AI) model can do it all. A U.S. company, OpenAI, has once again sent shock waves around the world, this time with GPT-4, its latest AI model. This large language model can understand and produce language that is creative and meaningful, and will power an advanced version of the company's sensational chatbot, ChatGPT. Currently, GPT-4 is available to try by premium subscription or by getting on OpenAI's waitlist.

GPT-4 and what it can do

GPT-4 is a remarkable improvement over its predecessor, GPT-3.5, which first powered ChatGPT. GPT-4 is more conversational and creative. Its biggest innovation is that it can accept text and image input simultaneously, and consider both while drafting a reply. For example, if given an image of ingredients and asked the question, "What can we make from these?"GPT-4 gives a list of dish suggestions and recipes. The model can purportedly understand human emotions, such as humorous pictures. Its ability to describe images is already benefiting the visually impaired.

While GPT-3.5 could not deal with large prompts well, GPT-4 can take into context up to 25,000 words, an improvement of more than 8x. GPT-4 was tested in several tests that were designed for humans and performed much better than average. For instance, in a simulated bar examination, it had the 90th percentile, whereas its predecessor scored in the bottom 10%. GPT-4 also sailed through advanced courses in environmental science, statistics, art history, biology, and economics.

However, GPT-4 failed to do well in advanced English language and literature, scoring 40% in both. Nevertheless, its performance in language comprehension surpasses other high-performing language models, in English and 25 other languages, including Punjabi, Marathi, Bengali, Urdu and Telugu. ChatGPT-generated text infiltrated school essays and college assignments almost instantly after its release; its prowess now threatens examination systems as well.

OpenAI has released preliminary data to show that GPT-4 can do a lot of white-collar work, especially programming and writing jobs, while leaving manufacturing or scientific jobs relatively untouched. Wider use of language models will have effects on economies and public policy.

The advent of GPT-4 upgrades the question from what it can do, to what it augurs. Microsoft Research (Microsoft has invested in OpenAI) mentioned observing "sparks" of artificial general intelligence — a system that excels at several task types and can comprehend and combine concepts such as writing code to create a painting or expressing a mathematical proof in the form of a Shakespearean play — in GPT-4. If we define intelligence as "a very general mental capability that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience", GPT-4 already succeeds at four out of these seven criteria. It is yet to master planning and learning.

Ethical questions

GPT-4 is still prone to a lot of its flaws its predecessor have. Its output may not always be factually correct — a trait OpenAI has called "hallucination".

While much better at cognising facts than GPT-3.5, it may still introduce fictitious information subtly. Ironically, OpenAI has not been transparent about the inner workings of GPT-4. The GPT-4 technical report clearly states: "Given both the competitive landscape and the safety implications of large-scale models like GPT-4, this report contains no further details about the architecture (including model size), hardware, training compute, dataset construction, training method, or similar."

While secrecy for safety sounds a plausible reason, OpenAI is able to subvert critical scrutiny of its model. GPT-4 has been trained on data scraped from the Internet that contains several harmful biases and stereotypes. There is also an assumption that a large dataset is also a diverse dataset and faithfully representative of the world at large.

This is not the case for the Internet, where people from economically developed countries, of young ages and with male voices are overrepresented. OpenAI's policy to fix these biases thus far has been to create another model to moderate the responses, since it finds curating the training set to be infeasible. Potential holes in this approach include the possibility that the moderator model is trained to detect only the biases we are aware of, and mostly in the English language. This model may be ignorant of stereotypes prevalent in non-western cultures, such as those rooted in caste.

Just asking GPT-4 to pretend to be "AntiGPT" causes it to ignore its moderation rules, as shown by its makers, thus jailbreaking it. As such, there is vast potential for GPT-4 to be misused as a propaganda and disinformation engine.

OpenAI has said that it has worked extensively to make it safer to use, such as refusing to print results that are obviously objectionable, but whether these efforts will keep GPT-4 from becoming a student at 'WhatsApp university' remains to be seen. The larger question here is about where the decision to not do the wrong thing should be born: in the machine's rules or in the human's mind.

A 'stochastic parrot'

In essence, GPT-4 is a machine that predicts the next word in an unfinished sentence, based on probabilities it learned as it trained on large corpuses of text. This is why linguistics professor Emily Bender called GPT-4 a "stochastic parrot", speaking in comprehensible phrases without understanding the meaning. But Microsoft Research has maintained that GPT-4 does understand what it is saying, and that not all intelligence is a type of next-word prediction.

Professor Bender and her peers highlighted the harm of large language models two years ago, citing both ethical concerns and the environmental costs. They also specified an opportunity cost imposed by a race for bigger models trained on larger datasets, distracting from smarter approaches that look for meaning and train on curated datasets. Their warnings have gone unheeded. Apart from OpenAI's models, AI company Anthropic has introduced a ChatGPT competitor named Claude. Google recently announced PaLM, a model trained to work with more degrees of freedom than GPT-3.

More broadly, efforts are underway worldwide to build a model with a trillion degrees of freedom. These will be truly colossal language-models that elicit questions about what they cannot do, but these concerns would be red herrings that distract us from whether we should be building models that simply test the limits of what is possible to the exclusion of society's concerns.

VAIKOM, A SATYAGRAHA, AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Jitesh Seth is a data scientist at DeepTek, researching the effectiveness of AI in radiology

The word 'Vaikom' has many associations — in Kerala, one thinks of the writer Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, the singer Vaikom Vijayalakshmi and Vaikathappan, the deity of the Vaikom temple. Many Indians will connect Vaikom with Mahatma Gandhi, while in Tamil Nadu, it conjures up the name and the image of Periyar.

But there is more to it in terms of a social movement of consequence. March 30 was a significant day in connection with Vaikom, a serene town in Kottayam, Kerala. The date also marks the commencement of the centenary year of the Vaikom temple street entry movement that was launched in 1924, and a milestone in temple entry movements in India. This non-violent movement was to end the prohibition imposed on backward communities in using the roads around the Vaikom Mahadeva temple. It was the prelude to the temple entry proclamation of Kerala in 1936. Launched by leaders in Kerala such as T.K. Madhavan, K.P. Kesava Menon and George Joseph, on the advice of Mahatma Gandhi, the movement was sustained and successfully conducted by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, then president of the Tamil Nadu Congress, and others between 1924 and 1925.

Periyar's entry, conditions

Supported by the Kerala Congress, the committee against untouchability launched the protest on March 30, 1924, where three persons from various communities prevented from entering the temple streets were to go flag off the satyagraha. The protest sustained itself for more than one and a half years, leading to many arrests and satyagrahis being jailed. The government suddenly stopped these arrests after April 9. Instead, police ire was now directed against leaders of the protest and the leaders of Kerala who had camped in Vaikom. Their arrests created a vacuum as there was no leader to lead the protest.

This led to leaders such as Neelakandan Nampoothiri and George Joseph to request Periyar to lead the protest. There was no looking back. As a mark of appreciation, the editor of Tamil journal Navasakthi and scholar, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, or Thiru.Vi.Ka. conferred the title Vaikom Veerar (Hero of Vaikom) on Periyar.

The Vaikom movement was of many hues — as day-to-day protests, arrests, of inquiries, jail terms and and agitations and attacks by orthodox Hindu traditionalists Even the Akalis from Punjab travelled to Vaikom to supply food to the protesters. There was also the support of the higher castes for a 13-day march to the capital, a resolution in the Assembly in support of the sanchara (free entry to the streets around the temple), its defeat, and also the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi to negotiate between the government, protesters and orthodox Hindus.

Since Mahatma Gandhi insisted that it should be a local protest, requests to make it a pan-India movement failed. Backed by the government and the administration, the traditionalists caused many troubles for the satyagrahis, which included counter rallies marked by violence. The resolution for the right to sanchara was defeated in the Assembly by the open support of the traditionalists and the indirect pressure of the government. But the satyagrahis overcame the hurdles. Tamils, who went to participate in the protest, lent a helping hand to Keralites in favour of temple entry for all communities.

The Tamil role

Tamil Nadu played a pivotal role in Vaikom Satyagraha, which symbolised a struggle by the "untouchables". Periyar and Kovai Ayyamuthu, a firebrand leader, worked in tandem with leaders in Kerala. But they faced repressive action. There was a rally by the upper castes from Vaikom led by Mannathu Padmanabhan in favour of the protesters and another rally in the south, in support of temple entry, led by Emperumal Naidu from Nagercoil. Sivathanu Pillai, a leader from Nagercoil (which was a part of Travancore) spoke at the meeting that culminated at Trivandrum beach. There were also arrests. The names of Tamils who participated in the movement are published in my book, Vaikom Porattam (Vaikom Struggle).

Over 603 days

So, a significant temple street entry movement that began on March 30, 1924 ended on November 23, 1925. In these 603 days, there were many important events. In the wake of new Yuva Raja ascending to the throne, 19 leaders, including Periyar, Kesava Menon and T.K. Madhavan, were released on August 30, 1924. The rally by the upper castes that began on November 1, reached Trivandrum on November 13, submitting its memorandum to the Queen regent. The sanchara resolution that was taken up for voting in the Assembly in February 1925, was defeated by a single vote. Mahatma Gandhi, who was in Kerala, held talks with the Queen of Travancore, social reformer Narayana Guru, traditionalists and police commissioner W.H. Pitt. On November 17, the satyagrahis announced their decision to withdraw their protest. On November 23, the government of the Travancore princely state declared that people could enter three of the four streets around Vaikom temple, thus bringing the protest to an end. There was a victory celebration on November 29, 1925, presided over by Periyar.

The Kerala government has now decided to commemorate the movement by organising various cultural events. Tamil Nadu too is observing the occasion, as announced by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin in the Assembly session. A word about the Kerala government's memorial. It is not the same one that I saw in 2008, as constant refurbishments are evident. A memorial for Periyar, being maintained by the Tamil Nadu government since 1994, may be the only structure for people in Tamil Nadu to understand what happened. There is also the practice in Tamil Nadu of naming children after Vaikom — one that began in 1930

Vaikom is more than just a name of a town. It is a symbol of social justice and symbolises the eradication of caste barriers. It is one that still burns bright in history and the social justice movement.

A NEW CHAPTER

Scotland has more immediate priorities than working towards independence

Scotland has made history in electing as its First Minister Humza Yousaf, 37, who is, as the son of Pakistani immigrants, the first ever Muslim and person of Asian descent to take up the role, and also the youngest leader in that capacity. A career politician who studied politics at university, Mr. Yousaf has been a Member of the Scottish Parliament for 12 years and an insider of the Scottish National Party's politics, serving variously as Transport Minister, Justice Secretary and Health Secretary. In rising to the top, Mr. Yousaf is stepping into the shoes of his predecessor, Nicola Sturgeon, who set the tenor of Scottish politics for nearly a decade, especially in the context of Scotland's role in the United Kingdom and on the complex question of Brexit. Mr. Yousaf won 52% of the votes in the SNP leadership contest for running a campaign that committed to delivering Scottish independence from the U.K. and re-joining the European Union. Scots will now be watching to see whether Mr. Yousaf will live up to his reputation as a "continuity candidate" in the context of these big political questions, and equally, whether he steers their country through the choppy waters of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the challenging transition to renewable energy, and the long-promised reform of the National Health Service and other vital public services.

Yet, the very nature of the task facing the current First Minister is different from what it has been in the past. According to recent polling, Scottish support for independence from the U.K. dropped to 39%, less than the 44.7% who voted for the campaign in the 2014 referendum, and significantly less compared to the 58% that it received in 2020 in the wake of the Scotland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Mr. Yousaf has vowed to reinvigorate the independence campaign by speaking to ordinary Scottish people across the land, and that his would be "… the generation that delivers independence for Scotland", U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is already reported to have rejected Mr. Yousaf's call for independence. Further, London has sent a clear signal that a referendum cannot lead to the breakup of the U.K. unless Westminster approves it — and that is unlikely. To make things worse, the SNP, in the words of its President, Michael Russell, is in a "tremendous mess", and the scars of infighting are yet to heal. Between the apparently insurmountable barriers to a successful referendum for Scottish independence, the tantalising but distant prize of EU reintegration, and the very real dangers of uncontrolled inflation and energy price rises, Mr. Yousaf certainly has his work cut out.

THE PIEZOELECTRIC EFFECT IN LIQUIDS

An illustration of an electric current. Nikhita Singhal/Unsplash

Why does Quartz exhibit the piezoelectric effect? Why has the effect not been observed in liquids till now? In what type of liquid has it now been discovered? What are the applications of this new discovery? Will it have any environmental benefits?

The story so far:

For the first time, scientists have reported evidence of the piezoelectric effect in liquids. The effect has been known for 143 years and in this time has been observed only in solids. The new finding challenges the theory that describes this effect as well as opens the door to previously unanticipated applications in electronic and mechanical systems. The effect was found in pure 1-butyl-3-methyl imidazolium bis(trifluoromethyl-sulfonyl)imide and 1-hexyl-3-methyl imidazolium bis(trifluoromethylsulfonyl)imide — both ionic liquids (liquids which are made of ions instead of molecules) at room temperature. The study paper was published in the Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters.

What is the piezoelectric effect?

In the piezoelectric effect, a body develops an electric current when it is squeezed. Quartz is the most famous piezoelectric crystal; it is used in analog wristwatches and clocks. Such crystals are also used in other instruments where converting mechanical stress to a current is useful.

Quartz is silicon dioxide (SiO_2). The quartz crystal consists of silicon and oxygen atoms at the four vertices of a three-sided pyramid; each oxygen atom is shared by two pyramids. These pyramids repeat themselves to form the crystal. The effective charge of each pyramid is located slightly away from the centre. When a mechanical stress is applied, that is when the crystal is squeezed, the position of the charge is pushed further from the centre, giving rise to a small voltage. This is the source of the effect.

Why is the effect in liquids surprising?

The reason the piezoelectric effect has only been expected in solids thus far is that the body being squeezed needs to have an organised structure, like the pyramids of quartz. Liquids don't have such structure as they take the shape of the container.

Physicists explain the effect using a combination of Hooke's law — that the force required to squeeze an object is linearly (i.e. non-exponentially) proportional to the amount of squeezing — and the properties of dielectric materials. These are materials that don't conduct electricity but whose electrons are still mildly affected by an electric field. Hooke's law is not clear when the body isn't very compressible.

"While I am unwilling to claim this requires a complete rethink of the physics of piezoelectrics, the observation of the effect in ionic liquids appears on its face to be inconsistent with the current model," Gary Blanchard, a professor at the Department of Chemistry, Michigan State University, and a coauthor of the paper, told The Hindu. "An implication of our findings is the existence of some manner of organisation in ionic liquids that is not seen in 'normal' liquids." Indeed, their discovery will have to be modelled in ionic liquids specifically. This is because, according to the paper, 'normal' and ionic liquids of the kind tested in the study respond very differently, at the molecular level, when an electric charge is "imposed" on them.

"Within the framework of the current understanding, the piezoelectric effect requires 'persistent' order within the material," Dr. Blanchard explained. "Normal liquids and gases have not been shown to exhibit order that persists long enough to be observed and characterised."

What new applications are possible?

According to the paper, "The discovery … opens the door to applications that have previously not been accessible with solid-state materials, and [room-temperature ionic liquids] are more readily recyclable and in many instances pose fewer environmental issues than many currently used piezoelectric materials."

The liquids also displayed the inverse piezoelectric effect: they became distorted when an electric charge was applied. Dr. Blanchard told the magazine IEEE Spectrum that this fact could be used to control how the liquids bent light passing through them by passing different currents through them. That is, using this simple control mechanism, vials of these liquids could be lenses with dynamic focusing abilities.

"I believe the most pressing matter is to develop a theoretical framework with predictive power to understand these experimental observations," Dr. Blanchard stated.

Having a theory to explain the liquids' behaviour could reveal why these liquids behave the way they do, which in turn could reveal better ways to develop newer applications.

THE ISSUES WITH THE QUALITY CONTROL ORDERS FOR FIBRES

How would the new orders from the BIS deter international textile imports?

The story so far:

Quality Control Orders (QCO) have been issued for fibres — cotton, polyester and viscose — that constitute the basic raw materials for majority of the Indian textile and clothing industry. While the standards were available earlier too, these are now revised and made mandatory for a few, and yet to be finalised for others. International manufacturers of these fibres, who supply to India, are also mandated to get a certificate from the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), which is the certifying authority for the QCOs.

Why are fibres covered under QCOs?

The Indian textile and clothing industry consumes both indigenous and imported fibres and filaments. The imports are for different reasons — cost competitiveness, non-availability in the domestic market, or to meet a specified demand of the overseas buyer. The main aim of the QCO is to control import of sub-quality and cheaper items and to ensure that customers get quality products. The entire supply chain, from the textile manufacturers to exporters, has so far focused on quality standards prescribed by the buyers.

What challenges does the new mandate bring?

India imports annually 50,000 - 60,000 tonnes of viscose fibre and its variants such as Modal and Tencel LF from nearly 20 countries. In the case of polyester, almost 90,000 tonnes of polyester fibre and 1.25 lakh tonnes of POY (Polyester Partially Oriented Yarn) are imported annually.

The overseas fibre manufacturers sell not only to India but to other countries too. The supply of some fibres to India is in small quantities. Getting the certificate from the BIS involves a cost and and hence not all are interested in getting the certificate. The Indian textile manufacturers who are dependent on these suppliers for the raw material will have to either look at other suppliers or lose orders. For instance, a bed linen exporter in Tiruppur district imports polyester filament with functional properties from Turkey based on the demand of his European buyers. Though the imported filament constitutes just 6% of the product, the buyer has specified the source for the filament. Since the Turkey company is not interested in getting the BIS certificate, the exporter in Tiruppur has lost an order to Pakistan. Furthermore, BIS officials have to visit the manufacturing unit abroad before issuing the certificate and this process is yet to be completed for all suppliers who have applied for the BIS registration. There is no clarity on the fibres that were shipped before the certification and which will reach India in the coming days.

The textile buyers, be it domestic or international, have established a supply chain over the years and when there are constraints because of certification, the value chain is disrupted.

What is the way forward?

Be it viscose or polyester, some varieties of the fibre have special functional properties and separate HS (Harmonised Commodity Description and Coding System) code when imported. But, these are bundled in the QCO and thus have uniform quality standards. The textile industry imports just small quantities of such fibres and restricting its availability will deny Indian consumers of niche products. The textile industry is of the view that import of speciality fibres that are used as blends with other fibres should be made available without restriction. Also, any overseas applicant for the BIS certificate should get it without delay after inspection. Several textile units use lower grade fibres that are generated from rejects and wastes and these are not covered under the QCO. There is also a fear of costs going up for basic garments. Further, polyester spun yarn mills in the MSME sector need capital support to set up labs to test products. The QCO should be implemented only after the ambiguities are cleared and the anomalies set right, says the industry.

The BIS standards are mandatory for viscose staple fibre from March 29 and for five polyester products, including polyester staple fibre and polyester spun yarn from April 3.

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