



## Split wide open

The new government in Britain would do well to grasp the nuances of the voters' choice

No single party securing the necessary majority of 326 out of 650 seats in the House of Commons is not an unprecedented outcome in U.K. politics: it happened, for instance, in 2010 and in 1974. Yet the spectacle of non-majority party leaders seeking to meet the Queen the morning after in a bid to somehow cobble together a standing coalition government elicited sarcasm. Indeed, it is a winding path laden with avoidable pitfalls that has brought the U.K. to this crossroads. When Prime Minister Theresa May announced in April that she was calling snap elections in less than two months, little did she imagine that her sky-high favourability ratings and hopes for a thumping mandate for a hard Brexit would rapidly fizzle out. The Conservative Party leadership may have blundered in confusing the narrow win for the Leave campaign with a sense of public faith in the "strong and stable leadership" that Ms. May promised, not realising that the underlying voter intentions driving the two may be entirely distinct, even contradictory. Faith in a national leadership is driven by a broad swathe of domestic policy promises and outcomes, and unfortunately for the Tories voters assessed them as coming up short. The push for Brexit was, however, powered by a more limited desire for economic distance from the European Union, which voters may have believed another leader could deliver.

The "other leader" of the moment, of course, is Labour Party chief Jeremy Corbyn, who masterfully channelled his long experience of engaging freely with the public to underscore a subtle contrast in leadership style compared to Ms. May, considered to be aloof and surrounded by a small circle of advisers to the exclusion of many even from among her own party. Similarly, the government's "dementia tax" goof, plans to cut 20,000 police officers at a time when the country was vulnerable to the terror attacks of the sort witnessed in recent weeks, and talk of ending universal free school lunches contrasted embarrassingly with Labour's manifesto. Yet, it would be unwise to view the result as a victory of any sort for Labour. Ms. May's government could cling on with the support, from the inside or outside, of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, which won 10 seats. In one sense the British people have dealt themselves a difficult hand politically, for they now have to live with the prospect of continuing uncertainty on the direction that their country will take with regard to Brexit and also other domestic concerns. The silver lining may be that by exercising their democratic rights they have given voice to their collective political opinions; and whoever helms their nation would do well to understand all the nuances of their choice.

## Proper protocol

The revision of antibiotics classes by the WHO is a welcome step to prevent drug resistance

The revision of antibiotics classes by the World Health Organisation in its list of essential medicines is a welcome step in the global initiative to push back against antimicrobial resistance, the phenomenon of bacteria becoming resistant even to the most potent drugs. With a graded approach to the use of antibiotics, under which some medicines are reserved for the most resistant microbes, the WHO list can stop their misuse as broad-spectrum treatments. The Indian Council of Medical Research issued a warning two years ago, based on studies conducted in hospitals, that resistance to antibiotics was found in 50% of patients. A large number of infants were dying due to infections that did not respond to treatment. Antibiotics have had great success, extending the frontiers of medicine for over 70 years. But Alexander Fleming, who discovered the first antibiotic, himself foresaw the danger of relying too much on them. The revised WHO classification can mitigate the problem if the many issues associated with use of the drugs can be monitored and regulated. Within the realm of medical practice, the prescription of antibiotics is often guided by such factors as patient demand, competing alternative treatment systems, and even financial incentives. Close scrutiny of these by national stewardship programmes such as those initiated by the ICMR is needed. There are also environmental factors, including the widespread use of antibiotics on farm animals, that require more research to determine their role in building resistance.

One of the key aspects of the WHO's guidance is the availability of a first-line 'access' group of antibiotics at all times. Other drugs are placed under a 'watch' category as second choice, or as 'reserve' to be deployed as a last resort. Clearly, this system underscores the need for universal access to essential medicines both in the public health system and for patients cared for by private practitioners. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which has promised health assurance for all, must come out with a framework to ensure this. Access to speedy and accurate diagnosis is equally important in order to deploy the correct antibiotic early. While the medical community can be sensitised to its responsibility to prevent antimicrobial resistance, it will take enlightened policies on housing, sanitation and hygiene education to prevent new infections and the spread of disease-causing organisms: hand-washing, for instance, is extremely beneficial. Drug-resistant microbes pose a serious challenge today to treat, among other things, pneumonia, infection of blood and surgical sites, and meningitis. The quest for new classes of drugs goes on. An effective response demands scrupulous adherence to prescription discipline of the kind advocated by the WHO. India has severe asymmetries in the delivery of health care: rural-vs-urban, and poor-vs-affluent patients, to name just two. It will take good public health policies, sufficient funding and determined leadership to overcome antibiotic resistance.

# Shake-out in Westminster

The British general election has slain many political assumptions about the leading parties and voter choices



VIDYA RAM

On Wednesday night, the Union Chapel, a church in the central London borough of Islington that doubles as a popular and trendy music venue, played host to a different kind of stardom, as Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn held his last rally before Thursday's general election. "Oh Jeremy Corbyn" and "Jez We Can" were among the loud, musical chants of the audience gathered there, while more stood outside unable to get in. Such gatherings across the country have been the trademark of Mr. Corbyn since his epic campaign to become leader of the Labour party in 2015, but were scoffed at in the early days by his opponents within and outside his party, convinced that his supporters were hardly representative of the wider British public.

That assumption was thrown out with the bathwater on Thursday night, along with hopes of a comfortable Conservative victory, as the election resulted in a hung Parliament, with the Conservatives losing seats. The rubber stamp on the Conservative track record that Prime Minister Theresa May had sought was nowhere in sight. By contrast the vote for Labour was up by over three million.

### Holding off the right

Much uncertainty remains but there are a number of takeaways for Britain and beyond so far. First, the much-touted march of the right, vaunted by its proponents in the wake of the Brexit referendum and the victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. last year, is far from inevitable. What is happening in Britain points to something far more complex at work in the West: widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo that doesn't necessarily give into campaigns of fear and negativity pegged around immig-



AFP

ration and Islamophobia.

While the results and the preceding BBC exit poll came as a shock to many, the Conservatives could have looked back to the campaigns of the Brexit referendum to get a sense of where theirs may have floundered. Post-mortems of the Brexit campaigns had suggested that the Remain's focus on scaring people about what a Britain outside Europe would suffer rather than making a positive case for membership was one of the factors that contributed to its failure, and such an approach was certainly the case with the Conservative campaign this time round. Initial attempts to send a positive message focussed on Ms. May's track record quickly gave way to a highly personalised assault on Mr. Corbyn and other members of his team, with the Conservatives deriding the "coalition of chaos" that could result from the Labour Party working with others such as the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats. It attempted to pour scorn on Labour's spending plans and policies such as removing tuition fees for students, with the concept of a "Magic Money Tree." However, the Conservatives failed to make much headway with this as the party did not provide detailed costings in its manifesto, and questions were raised about the financial viability of their programme, which counted heavily on cutting

immigration, viewed by and large as a disaster by Britain's business community. The negative campaigning was cleverly and humorously played on by Labour at times, which used social media to its advantage with great mastery, through the campaign. #LastMinuteCorbynSmears was doing the rounds in the days before the election result, as Labour supporters parodied some of the attempts by the tabloids and others to barage people with scare stories about Mr. Corbyn and his policies.

### The Corbyn transformation

By contrast, the Labour campaign focussed overwhelmingly on its aspirations to build a nation "For the Many, Not the Few," cleverly shifting the debate away from Brexit to the impact that years of austerity, including for the past seven years under the Conservatives, had had on voters — from the schools their children attended to the pressures facing the National Health Service. Austerity even figured high in the debate around terrorism, with the Conservatives attempting to portray Mr. Corbyn as weak on security, failing to fully convince. They struggled as he shifted the focus back on them and the cuts that had been made to police forces over the past few years. In a television interview on Friday morning, even John Redwood, a Conservative MP to the right of the party, acknowledged

the public appetite for greater spending on public services.

The results also question the common perception that politics and politicians don't change over the course of the campaign, but merely reflect the sentiments that have ridden through it. Mr. Corbyn, a long-term passionate and principled politician who had taken up a range of causes over the years, from nuclear disarmament to cracking down on caste discrimination, proved able to juggle the different policies within his party. Some policies in the manifesto were ones that he had explicitly opposed in the past, such as the renewal of Trident, Britain's nuclear deterrent. Wary in his early days of working with the mainstream media, Mr. Corbyn was increasingly willing to engage over the course of the election, joining in a televised debate that he and Ms. May had originally not intended to participate in. Such moves helped draw in Labour voters who had initially been sceptical of him, as well as win support from within influential party figures, such as Tony Blair's ally Alastair Campbell.

Mr. Corbyn's earnest and passionate style contrasted with Ms. May's, as her attempt to position herself as a "bloody difficult woman" felt out of step with the mood of a country concerned about the ways in which negotiations over Brexit would pan out. Her refusal to take part in a televised debate, which Mr. Corbyn joined in at the last minute, accentuated that image, while moments captured of her on the election trail suggested she wasn't fully engaged with the specific concerns of communities. That was the case with an interview with a journalist from a local newspaper in the port town of Plymouth, which went viral online, where genuine questions about local concerns about potential Brexit-related job cuts were met with unemotional, highly general responses.

The result will have a huge impact on the Labour Party going forward, putting paid to the assumption of many within the party, since the days of Mr. Blair, that being on

centre ground was the party's only hope of success. The Corbyn manifesto is a radical one, with pledges to renationalise key infrastructure, raise taxes on corporations and the wealthy, and revisit Britain's interventionist foreign policy. The campaign has returned the British electoral system to one dominated by the two mainstream parties in a way it has not been for many years.

### Questions on Brexit

With Brexit negotiations set to commence soon, the result will also raise fundamental questions about Britain's Brexit strategy, though perhaps not in the way some had foreseen. The collapse of support for the right-wing UK Independence Party had been expected to benefit just the Conservatives, but Labour gained from them too, suggesting that the disillusionment that UKIP in part reflected did not necessarily involve policies focused around cutting immigration. While Labour has pledged "fair rules and reasonable management of migration", its immigration strategy would be a big departure from the tough Conservative approach, making allowances (significantly for India) for family reunions and a more welcoming environment for students. However, the results also suggested that there was limited public appetite for the Liberal Democrat pledge to hold a second referendum on the terms of the Brexit deal, as the party failed to make the comeback it had hoped to. At the same time, Labour has pledged to rip up the Conservatives' white paper and adopt a more conciliatory approach to the negotiations, which would include retaining the benefits of the single market and customs union.

Uncertainty is likely to continue in the coming days, but one thing is clear: political victory doesn't always equal winning an election, and as Mr. Corbyn said on Friday, British "politics has changed and politics isn't going back into the box it was in before."

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## The arc to Tokyo

The India-Japan nuclear deal is today less significant than it would have once been



PALLAVI AIYAR

Seven years of rollercoaster negotiations over an India-Japan civil nuclear energy deal came to fruition on Wednesday when Japan's Parliament, the Diet, approved the pact. Opposition parties voiced protest against the deal, highlighting concerns that India has provided insufficient guarantees for Japan's right to terminate the agreement in the event of New Delhi conducting a nuclear test. Nonetheless, the ruling coalition pushed the accord through with a majority vote. The agreement is set to take effect in early July.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe believes that nuclear exports are key to kick-starting a Japanese economy stuck in a holding pattern for more than two decades. For India, the deal represents hope that the 2008 waiver it received from the Nuclear Suppliers' Group might finally begin paying off given that so far it has had limited tangible benefits for the country's power industry. The deal with Japan is also a necessity for enabling India's bilateral nuclear deals with other countries. Key elements of

certain reactors like the AP 1000 and EPR, including safety components and domes, are a near-Japanese monopoly.

### Erosion of Japan's might

However, circumstances in the nuclear industry, both globally and specifically in Japan, are undergoing tumultuous changes, making the India-Japan deal less significant than it would have once been. Recent developments have diminished Japan's previously formidable nuclear capabilities, calling into question its very survival as a nuclear exporter of heft.

The most dramatic example is that of Toshiba, once a titan of the Japanese nuclear reactor industry that is currently struggling to stay afloat following the enormous losses and eventual bankruptcy of its U.S. nuclear unit, Westinghouse Electric. After writing down Westinghouse's value (the U.S. company had a total debt of \$9.8 billion), Toshiba declared a net loss of \$9.9 billion for the fiscal year that ended on March 31. At a news conference, Toshiba's president, Satoshi Tsunakawa, put it baldly, stating, "We have all but completely pulled out of the nuclear business overseas." A decade ago, Toshiba was dreaming of a big global expansion when it bought Westinghouse for \$5.4 billion with plans to install 45 new reactors worldwide by 2030.

Hitachi Ltd., another nuclear



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

heavyweight, also booked 'an estimated ¥65 billion (\$588 million) write-down for fiscal 2016 related to a stalled laser-based uranium enrichment joint venture with General Electric in the United States'. The company said 'demand for nuclear fuel in the U.S. was unlikely to grow as strongly as had been expected'.

Meanwhile, Japan's third major, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, is in trouble too. Its French partner, Areva, is mired in losses and undergoing a major restructuring. Areva logged losses equivalent to more than \$700 million in 2016, marking its sixth year in the red.

For the moment, Hitachi and Mitsubishi are not giving up on their overseas nuclear businesses. In February, Hitachi partnered with the Exelon Corp group to promote a nuclear power project in

the U.K. And according to Nikkei, Mitsubishi has reached a broad agreement to purchase about 15% of Areva's reactor unit, investing \$366 million for the stake. This will boost Mitsubishi's total investment in Areva to more than 70 billion yen (\$636 million).

Whether such a move is wise in the current context is questionable. In the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, the nuclear industry is facing a global crisis. Stricter safety regulations have spiked the costs of constructing plants and 'some countries have become more cautious about new reactors. Germany, for example, once a committed nuclear champion, has decided to pull out of nuclear power altogether by 2022'. Last year, Vietnam scrapped plans for nuclear plants thought to be a sure win for Japanese builders. And the feasibility study for a planned Turkish project is dragging on far longer than anticipated.

In Japan there has been no domestic construction on a new reactor for the past eight years, since a unit at the Tomari plant on the island of Hokkaido came on stream in 2009. Hitachi, Mitsubishi and Toshiba are all focussing on repair and maintenance of existing plants (most of which are idle) rather than on construction of new ones.

### Emergence of viable options

'The emergence of cheap shale oil and gas has made competition in

the energy sector tougher than ever, while wind and solar power generation are also growing as viable, alternative energy sources'. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), just three nuclear reactors started construction worldwide last year, and only 51 were begun between 2010 and 2016. In contrast 20 to 30 new were being built every year in the 1960s and 1970s.

The IAEA still expects global nuclear capacity to grow, until at least 2030, although it thinks the increase could be just 1.9% over the whole period. Faster growth will depend principally on the pace of demand in China, South Korea, eastern Europe and India.

In India, the cabinet decision last month to set up 10 nuclear reactors with a combined capacity of 7,000 megawatts, comes against this backdrop.

A recent Observer Research Institute study concludes that it is highly feasible for India's installed nuclear power capacity to rise to 40-50 gigawatts (GW) by mid-century, up from its current installed 5.78 GW capacity. For Japan's nuclear industry this is an opportunity that might not knock twice, yet even if grabbed unreservedly, it might still not be enough to revive the archipelago's flailing nuclear ambitions.

Pallavi Aiyar is a journalist and author based in Tokyo

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Agitation and politics

The Congress has been trying hard to draw political mileage out of the death of farmers in Madhya Pradesh ("M.P. govt. shunts out Collectors, SP", June 9). Media footage was proof enough that the Congress has been only shedding crocodile tears in the hope that the unrest brings disrepute to the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh. Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi has forgotten about the farmers who have ended their lives in Karnataka, a Congress-ruled State. The Congress is living in a fool's paradise if it thinks that it can make political capital out of the farmers' agitation to win forthcoming elections.

K.V. SEETHARAMAIAH,  
Hassan, Karnataka

It appears that Rahul Gandhi is focussed on fishing in troubled waters, with his advisers waiting to sniff out trouble spots in NDA-ruled States for him. He is in there in a jiffy trying to inquire into the 'perceived grievances of the aggrieved'. It's a different story altogether that he didn't have the least inclination for such activities when his party was in power at the Centre for 10 years, nor in the few States where his party is now in power.

SURI R.,  
New Delhi

For an economy where 50% of the people are employed in the agricultural sector, what are the steps being taken to boost productivity? Why doesn't

the government adopt modern farming practices? Three years ago, the BJP projected itself as a party that had farmers' interests at its heart. Why is the Prime Minister now silent?

GAURAV BHATIA,  
Faridabad, Haryana

### Losing grip?

The government appears to be donning a controversial mantle and one fears that it may be forced to wear many more of them. In its singular pursuit of winning the 2014 election at all costs, every wing of the right wing was sequestered by the BJP to energise the electorate. It is another matter that these very groups are now forcing the government and the party to come up with executive fiat on the consumption of beef,

animal slaughter and the like. It is time that the BJP's executive, party and ideological wings are orchestrated by a pivotal authority lest they lose grip on a greater purpose — that of smooth and peaceful governance of the nation.

R. NARAYANAN,  
Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh

### Outplayed by Sri Lanka

One must compliment Sri Lanka for pulling off a seven wicket victory over India in the ICC Champions Trophy ('Sport' - "Sri Lanka coasts to an easy win over India", June 9). It was unfortunate that our bowlers, especially the much-hyped Hardik Pandya and Ravindra Jadeja, were found to be wanting and proved to be pedestrian bowlers. Adding to our woes was the pathetic

fielding. The Indian captain should bring in ace strike bowler Ravichandran Ashwin to play the do-or-die match against South Africa.

N. HARIHARAN,  
Chennai

### At Roland Garros

By lifting his maiden Grand Slam title in the French Open mixed-doubles along with Canadian partner Gabriela Dabrowski, Rohan Bopanna has made every Indian proud. Though they were broken once, Bopanna

and Dabrowski showed their nerves, fought back dauntlessly and converted three of the five breakpoint opportunities they got to push the match into a tie-break.

Tennis is a game India needs to develop after Bopanna has become the fourth Indian ever to clinch a major international tennis event.

R. SAMPATH,  
Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:  
www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

**CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:**  
The results column of Women's semi finals at Roland Garros ('Sport', June 9, 2017), erroneously mentioned Simona Halep as the 2nd seed. She is actually the third seed.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturji Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

# Fault lines in the fields

From a persisting cash crunch due to demonetisation to a price free fall because of a bumper produce, it's a big bag of woes for farmers in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. **Mahesh Langa** and **Jayant Sriram** report on the gathering storm as their protests for a fairer deal threaten to escalate



Abhishek Patidar, 19, had just passed his Class 11 exam this year with dreams of becoming a doctor. His family owns a piece of land – about 27 bighas – in Barkheda Path, a village 22 km north of Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh where they grow soybean, *methi* (fenugreek) and *chana* (gram). On June 6, Abhishek went to Mandsaur along with hundreds of others from his village to protest against the falling crop prices that were pushing his family to the brink of desperation. Tragically, he became one of the victims of police firing, taking three bullets on a day when farmer protests across the western belt stretching from Madhya Pradesh to Maharashtra reached a frenzied pitch. “He was too young but was keen to join the protest. We grow everything in our 27-bigha land but in the last three years, prices have plunged and ruined us,” says Abhishek’s father, Dinesh Patidar, 55, tears rolling down his eyes.

## Price pinch in Malwa

Barkheda Path is typical of the villages in this region. With an approximate population of 3,500, 95% of the population is engaged in farming in landholdings that are less than a hectare per family. Abhishek’s family members narrate their tale of loss. “The last three years have crushed our backbone because prices have plunged, forcing us to sell our produce at rates where we don’t even recover our investment,” says Dinesh, adding, “today’s market price for soybean is ₹2,500-2,700 per quintal while our cost to produce one quintal is above ₹3,000.” Not only soybean, prices of onion, gram, *methi*, vegetables, milk have bottomed while input costs have soared for seeds, fertilizers, labour and transport, he says.

Madhya Pradesh consistently boasts of double-digit growth in agriculture – averaging 13.9% during 2010-15 – and like many other States, had a bumper harvest following a good monsoon in 2016. Yet as per the National Crime Records Bureau statistics, as many as 1,982 farmers committed suicide in the State in 2016-17. A combination of factors – falling procurement prices because of a glut of produce in the market, a cash crunch due to last year’s demonetisation policy and the predominance of smaller landholdings which are expensive to maintain – have led to a simmering anger. Like their counterparts in many parts of Maharashtra, farmers in Mandsaur launched an agitation demanding remunerative prices for their onion, soybean and pulses. As thousands of farmers poured onto the streets, stopping traffic, attacking trucks and confronting police, things turned violent and five farmers were killed as a result of police firing and a curfew was imposed across five districts.

Farmers from the Mandsaur-Neemuch stretch in the Malwa region, aside from growing soybean and chana, also grow a range of spices and medicinal plants like *methi*, *dhaniya* (coriander), *jeera* (cumin) and *ajwain* (carom seeds). Yet, farmers in the region claim that prices for these cash crops have been falling for the past few years. “We never sold *methi* below ₹4,000 per quintal during the Manmohan Singh’s government. But ever since Modi became PM, *methi* prices have collapsed,” says Dinesh, showing *methi* gunny bags stored in his house.

In addition to low prices, what has aggravated the situation is the Central government’s demonetisation move late last year that has adversely hit the rural and agrarian economy. “*Notebandi* has almost finished us in the rural areas. Even after selling our produce, we don’t get money in our hands before at least two-three weeks and sometimes even a month,” says Lalchand Mali, a farmer from Barkheda Panth.

Interestingly, not many farmers in the region are seeking loan waiver as is being claimed in the media. Most of them want better and remunerative prices that cover their costs and provide them income for survival. “Believe me, no true farmer would want loan waiver. If the government provides better prices, we will repay our debt. The problem is the government never provides better prices,” adds Lalchand, who owns a two-hectare plot in the village.

## The Maharashtra stir

In the town of Niphad in Maharashtra’s Nashik district, the main vegetable market, located in a large yard opposite the tehsil office, lies deserted. In a series of godowns that lie adjacent to the yard there is a pink gleam as sunlight filters through to large sacks of onions that are waiting to be transported. In Vittal Sanap’s godown, which is nearly packed to capacity with produce, a large truck



**A double blow:** “We grow everything in our 27-bigha land but in the last three years, prices have plunged and ruined us,” says Dinesh Patidar, 55, whose 19-year-old son, Abhishek, died in the police firing in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh. •VIJAY SONELJI

with a tarpaulin cover has been parked inside for three days even as workers go about their usual task of loading onions into bright red sacks.

“We had an order for onions to go to Madras (Chennai) a few days back but the truck was accosted on the road before it could get to Nashik and all the onions were dumped on the road,” says Sanap. Onions that are left at the mercy of the elements lose their value almost immediately, so for now Sanap is just waiting for things to tide over. “The *hartal* (strike) will have to end soon because there are many farmers who have no choice but to sell their goods even if prices are bad.”



Onions and other vegetables from godowns like Sanap’s go to the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) market in Nashik from where they are taken to other cities in Maharashtra like Mumbai and Pune as well as to other States in the south like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and even Sri Lanka. The APMC market in Nashik is appropriately mammoth – on either side of a dusty road are two large open halls, each the size of a large bus terminus with tall pillars running right through. On June 8, a day after the one-week strike called by farmers in the region officially ended, a small group of women have set up shop to sell vegetables like cabbage, chillies, tomatoes and cucumber. They take up barely a quarter of one hall but as produce is brought in by farmers in smaller trucks, there are murmurs of anger outside with some arguments breaking out as the produce is passed inside. “These women are not from Maharashtra, you can tell from their earrings that they are from Rajasthan. These are just small local farmers who want to break the strike,” says one of the men. Still, even these small traces of activity raise the suspicion that divisions are beginning to form in what was till now a unified

movement in the district.

## United in adversity

As the major commercial supplier in this region, Nashik may have become the epicentre of the farmers’ movement but it all started in a village called Puntamba in Ahmednagar district three months ago on April 3, when the village’s gram panchayat passed a resolution warning of a ‘Shetkari Sampa’ (Strike of the Ryots) from June 1. Their charter of demands addressed to Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis included ensuring crop procurement prices at least 50% above production costs, a complete waiver of farm loans, 100% subsidy on drip/sprinkler irrigation systems, and a minimum milk purchase price of ₹50.

Farmers across the region may find a specific resonance in one or the other of these demands but what seems to have really helped the movement spread from Puntamba across the Nashik-Ahmednagar-Pune stretch of Maharashtra is the language in which the idea of the strike was communicated. “Farmers face many hardships but this was the first time I’ve seen farmers actually willing to go on strike to and risk everything to see that they are given

some recognition,” says Abhijit Dige, who owns an eight-acre farm about 60 km from Nashik. “Politicians don’t know what farmers go through, it’s not like other businesses. Devendra Fadnavis should come and work in the field for 14 hours a day, work at night in the cold to tend to onion crops, and then maybe he’ll understand,” he says.

That same sentiment is echoed by Deepak Rane who has a one-acre farm just off Niphad where he grows cauliflower. “The strike should not stop because people don’t realise what we go through. I am not able to recover the cost that I bear to treat my crops with chemicals and fertilizers. I work from 6 in the morning; what is it all for?” he says.

“People from all walks of life face hardships but have you ever considered why it is only farmer suicides you have heard of?” asks Dinesh Nikam, another trader in Nashik who has refused to take orders for onions and other vegetables because he says he stands in solidarity with the farmers.

## The illusion of prosperity

When farm distress was first reported in Maharashtra, it focussed mainly on the prices of tur and arhar *dal* and the difficulties faced by farmers in the drought-prone Marathwada and Amaravati regions. After two years of consecutive drought, a good monsoon in 2016 brought in a bountiful harvest and the markets were simply swamped with produce. Record harvests were offset by a steep fall in procurement prices for both crops.

The plight of those farmers is often referenced by prominent leaders of the movement in Nashik and Ahmednagar though it has to be noted that this region is substantially different. The stretch from Ahmednagar to Nashik, and down to Kolhapur and Sangli where the movement spread is a fairly contiguous belt that is home to relatively more prosperous farmers. The majority of farmers in the region over the past two decades have moved from cultivation of crops like *bajra* (pearl millet) and *jowar* (sorghum) to cash crops like grapes and onions. Many have invested in dairy farming (Puntamba, for instance, is home to many dairy farmers).

Vegetables, then, are actually only a small part of the produce from this region and while the enduring visual images of the strike may be of vegetables like cauliflower and cabbage being dumped on the road, there are many places where people show us pictures shot on cell phones of roads lined with pomegranates, which is the most recent entry to the crop market here.

In Italy, for instance, a village about 10 km from Niphad that was the one of the centres of the agitation, Swarupnanda Bhorgade says that about 80% of the village of 5,000-odd farmers is involved in grape farming, sometimes done in rotation with onions. “I have been growing grapes for the last 20 years and till about seven or eight years ago I used to sell it for about ₹50 a kilo,” says Bhorgade. “So it was only natural that I planted grapes on every inch of my 15 acres. Now it costs me about ₹15 to harvest a kilo of grapes and all I can get on the market is ₹9 to ₹18 a kilo,” he says.

Bhorgade attributes this to a number of factors, the most important of which is ‘climate’ – storms would come unseasonably and the crops would be destroyed. Or there would be hailstorms. This past year, the weather was regular and the crop was good for once but there is no price. “You have to take into account how much we have spent on growing these crops and how we will recover it. It costs a lot to invest in crops like grapes and pomegranates,” he says, adding that farmers from the region initially tried to rope in their counterparts from Amaravati who grew tur *dal* but their situation was completely different. “They have larger landholdings and their crop is rain-fed. They don’t have to spend on irrigation and other chemicals and fertilizer like we do.”

On June 3, a faction of farmer leaders decided to call off the strike after Mr. Fadnavis announced a partial loan waiver for small and marginal farmers that would come into effect on October 31. In a large meeting on June 8 in Nashik that included about 3,000 farmers and 150 representatives of farmer associations from across the State, that compromise was rejected. “The people who met the Chief Minister did so late at night without anybody knowing and the agreement was not along the lines of what we were originally demanding,” said Raju Shetti, president of Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana that has taken a major role in advancing the agenda. If the government did not accede to the demand to waive all loans immediately and bump up procurement prices, the meeting decided that the strike would move to a new phase of *hartals* across district and collectors offices from June 12 and ‘rail rokos’ in some areas. As of June 8, the meeting concluded that farmers should be allowed to take their produce to the market in order to meet their minimum needs. “Look for Puntamba on that day (June 12),” says one of the farmers who attended the meeting. “The first rail roko will be there, where it all started.”



**Bitter harvest:** Traders have not been able to send onions to other parts of the country due to the farmers’ strike. Picture shows a worker checking sacks of onion in the market yard at Niphad near Nashik, Maharashtra. •VIVEK BENDRE