Unsurprising verdict

Tamil Nadu's quota for medical students was unlikely to survive judicial scrutiny anyway

The Madras High Court verdict striking down the Tamil Nadu government order that had earmarked 85% of seats in undergraduate medical and dental courses for students from the State Board is no surprise at all. Once it was laid down by law as well as by the Supreme Court that the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test will be the sole basis for admission to medical courses, it was unlikely that any court would have allowed a classification of students based on the stream through which they passed their higher secondary examinations. Tamil Nadu had abolished entrance tests in 2006, and since then has been admitting students based on their marks in the qualifying school examination. The only way out for the State was to get its legislation for an exemption from NEET approved by the President. In the absence of presidential assent for its Bills, it was forced to bring in reservation for State Board students through an executive order, but could not defend it in court. The State government will have to shoulder the blame for the confusion over its admission policy this year, as well as the tension it has caused to students. It ought not to have given the impression to students that presidential assent to its Bills was imminent and that NEET would not be the basis for admission this year. Last year it managed to convince the Centre to amend the law for a one-time exemption for undergraduate courses, but it did not utilise the time to prepare students to master the demanding NEET syllabus.

However, the fact that the State government failed to upgrade its educational standards does not mean Tamil Nadu's apprehensions about NEET do not merit consideration. The fear that NEET would be insurmountable for students from rural and underprivileged backgrounds and those who cannot afford coaching centres is real. So too is the concern that the government may not get committed doctors to serve in rural areas if most of the seats are cornered by CBSE students. According to the government, if a NEET-based merit list is drawn up, 72% of medical seats in government colleges and government quota seats in private colleges would go to CBSE school students. Tamil Nadu is able to run its network of hospitals efficiently mainly because of a recruitment policy that gives weightage to service candidates in post-graduate medical admissions. NEET may be an answer to rampant commercialisation of medical education, but it should not be at the cost of the government's socio-economic goals. In a country with regional, economic and linguistic disparities, uniformity is no virtue, especially when it is thrust on unwilling States. The political leadership at the Centre as well as in the States would do well to work together to evolve a flexible admission policy that gives some leeway to the States and meets the triple goals of fairness, transparency and freedom from exploitation in admissions.

Adrift at sea

The separation of a massive iceberg shows how precarious the Antarctic ecosystem is

The dramatic but inevitable calving of a trillion-ton iceberg from the Larsen C Ice Shelf in Antarctica raises the question, did a warming atmosphere have a significant impact on the process? Scientists from Project MIDAS, a U.K.-based Antarctic research project that has been looking at the ice shelf for many years, have said the formation of icebergs is natural, and no link to human-induced climate change was available in this case. Yet, the impact of such a loss on the stability of the ice shelf itself may not be benign. Should it disintegrate, glaciers normally feeding into the floating shelf may have nothing to restrain them, and could then contribute to sea level rise, possibly at a slow rate. Such fears are based on the unambiguous data on the thinning of the Larsen Ice Shelf. Researchers said in 2003 that Antarctic Peninsula ice shelves retreated each year since 1980 by about 300 sq.km. This erosion has been interspersed by two previous collapses of smaller ice shelves, Larsen A in 1995 and Larsen B in 2002, the latter providing strong evidence of subsequent accelerated glacier flow into the sea. While any negative impact of the latest event will likely be felt years or decades later, it highlights the need to stop continued warming of the planet from man-made carbon emissions.

Antarctica is a climate stabilising factor, and the importance of the marine West Antarctic ice sheet was highlighted by U.S. scientists over four decades ago. In the context of rising emissions from the burning of fossil fuels, a cautionary note was sounded, on warming seas hastening the melting of the shelves that hold its great mass. Indeed, the point made was that except for man-made causes, there was no anticipated factor in the natural geological cycle that would disturb Antarctica. The separation of an iceberg almost 6,000 sq. km in size from the ice shelf shows the importance of such alarms. Fortunately, newer satellite technologies, which were not available during earlier instances of iceberg calving, will help in the study of the fragile peninsular region and Antarctica as a whole. Among the stark effects of changes could be a shift in biodiversity: species like emperor penguins which depend on sea ice to complete their life cycle are at risk if ice cover declines. Any dramatic changes will only add to the worry of irreversible effects of climate change, given that the Arctic and Greenland have also been losing ice cover. Clearly, the loss of a massive portion of the Larsen C Ice Shelf marks another milestone in the evolution of this remote region. Yet, the lack of long-term data on Antarctica, as opposed to other regions, makes it difficult to arrive at sound conclusions. What is clear is that the last pristine continent should be left well alone, with a minimum of human interference, even as research efforts are intensified to study the impact of human activities in the rest of the world on this wilderness.

How Brexit has begun to unravel

With just 20 months to go till Britain is meant to leave the EU, it's become potentially more of a time bomb



t's often the case that when a senior politician ridicules concerns about a policy or programme, you know it is really running into trouble. That's certainly true of Brexit, David Davis, the "Brexit" secretary (the cabinet minister who heads the clunkily named Department for Exiting the European Union) told a House of Lords select committee earlier this week that he viewed with "amusement" press reports suggesting the government was "softening" its stance on Brexit, with some even suggesting that it might not happen at all. Nicholas Watt, a senior editor of the BBC news programme Newsnight, reported last week he had spoken to a number of senior figures, including influential supporters of Brexit, who now believed there was a "strong chance" it might not happen at all, a sentiment that has been repeated by others in one way or another since.

Electoral setback

Questions about the viability of Brexit as the government had laid it out - in Prime Minister Theresa May's crucial Lancaster House speech in January - emerged rapidly after the election and the government's loss of its overall parliamentary majority. Ms. May had pegged the election around public support for her version of Brexit, which involved leaving the single market in order to satisfy public demand for border controls, as well as exiting the customs union in order for Britain to be able to negoti-



ate tariff-free deals unrestrictedly with the rest of the world. With the loss of seats, and rise of Labour putting this mandate in question, many asked whether the party would be forced to soften its stance on a number of key issues, particularly given its alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, which had made the issue of the open border between the two Irelands all the more important to solve. (The issue of how to keep an open border while ending the customs union is seen as one of the major practical challenges of Brexit.)

There are a number of reasons why those questions have persisted since. Firstly, the practical issues around Brexit - and the interpretation of the "will of the people" vis-à*vis* the referendum – seem to be burgeoning rapidly, highlighted by an ongoing controversy over Britain's membership of the European industry regulator, Euratom. Britain had committed to leaving the agency when it notified Europe of its plans to leave the union, back in March. The government had suggested it had little option but to leave as it raised issues around jurisdiction European Court of Justice among other things, but legal opinion remains very divided, with many (even strident Brexiteers) suggesting that keeping Britain in Euratom remained completely viable and necessary. In fact, among those to criticise the government for its insistence on leaving was none other than the man who had headed the Vote Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings, who labelled those who were pushing to leave Euratom "morons". Others have warned that by leaving the regulator, Britain would lose out on crucial developments that had taken place, particularly around radiotherapy, which could delay the delivery of cancer drugs to patients.

No deal or bad deal?

Then there's the confusion on what the government policy on crucial areas is: for example, around the now infamous slogan of the Prime Minister that "no deal is better than a bad deal." That negotiating position has faced widespread criticism from both within and outside Conservative Party circles, for the perception internationally that Britain's aggressive negotiating stance was likely to be counteractive. Major questions are now being asked about whether a plan exists for the "no deal" scenario, with differing answers from senior cabinet members. "Are ministers just making it up as they go along?" asked Emily Thornberry, Britain's shadow foreign secretary at Prime Minister's Questions this week. Another crucial area over which confusion reigns is the issue of the transitional period that would ease Britain's exit for it and other member states, in particular what EU precepts or bodies would continue to be relevant over that period. Some fear the scale of the prac-

tical challenges facing the government is something they have not necessarily acknowledged. In an extraordinary intervention this week, Amyas Morse, the head of the National Audit Office, told the media ahead of the publication of a report that the government's approach to Brexit was in danger of falling apart "like a chocolate orange" with little flexibility involved in the government's approach or willingness to accommodate a backup plan. (The government's inflexibility on major issues became apparent with the publication of the "repeal bill", which removes the supremacy of EU law, and which includes no concessions on issues that opposition parties had sought such as on the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights.)

These issues arise at a time when economic conditions toughened, factors Brexiteers say are unrelated to the exiting process, but which critics say were just some of the repercussions they had warned about all along. Inflation in May climbed to its highest rate in four years, 2.9%, with weakness of the pound persisting, as wages remain subdued. While the unemployment rate is at its lowest level since the 1970s, the Office for National Statistics said last week that

ing at their highest rate since 2011, largely as a result of inflation. Anecdotal evidence has also suggested that concerns about Brexit have finally begun to hit investment into the country, while EU workers in areas such as health have begun to leave the country, creating potential skills shortages. Pessimism remains high about what will follow Brexit. On Wednesday, the ratings agency Moody's warned that it was 'unclear" whether the government would be able to deliver a "reason ably good outcome" in its negotiations with Europe, warning that the likelihood of an abrupt exit with no agreement and reversion to WTO trading rules had increased.

Continental shift

Overall, one has a sense of the upper hand lying very much with the continent. Bluff and bluster has continued in Britain. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson scoffed at the "divorce bill", the multibillionpound payment that Europe believes is owed to it by Britain as it exits the union, telling MPs that the EU could "go whistle." But his remarks were calmly rejected by Michel Barnier, the EU's chief nego-

He warned that without a recognition of the payments owed by Britain, trust would be broken and there would be little chance of negotiations moving forward. "I am not hearing any whistling, just the clock ticking," he said this week With just twenty months to go till Britain is meant to leave the union, with the purported mission of "taking back control" of borders, laws, and trade, it's potentially more of a time bomb.

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The charge of the right brigade

The right wing's use of rumour and fake news precedes social media and the current political resurgence



AKSHAYA MUKUL

I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew): Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Who.

I send them over land and sea, I send them east and west; But after they have worked for me I give them all a rest.

udyard Kipling's six honest serving-men would have been a disillusioned lot now, hunting not for news but busy correcting fake news, lamenting how the sacred 5Ws and one H that ran through the veins of all news have been sacrificed at the altar of hate politics. Now, news is created without them. Its practitioners are not the professional journalists but a fast-growing tribe of politicians and peddlers of hate, mostly among the right-wing establishment who, with a fake Twitter handle, use altered news, pictures and videos to alter the truth.

Rosenthal's iconic Iwo Jima picture is photoshopped with a tricolour, the Bharativa Janata Party's spokesperson goes to TV studios celebrating a surgical strike and an actor and BJP MP relies on an inter-

view in Pakistani media that writer Arundhati Roy never gave but wants her to be tied to an army jeep in Kashmir. Someone else attacks A.R. Rahman that gets retweeted by a Central minister and later, thankfully, deleted. Pictures of the Gujarat violence are being used for the BJP's Bengal project. The list of achievements of this regime that floods our WhatsApp is staggering. Thanks to a section of social media samaritans, the BJP's bluff gets called these days. But this is how it has always been. The right wing's tryst with rumour and fake news precedes social media and the current political resurgence. It is integral to the macho nationalism and their contested past.

Echo from the past

In their pantheon of fake news, nothing beats a pamphlet of 1946 that emanated from Bengal and soon spread through the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) and even Maharashtra. The Bang Kanya Ki Marmasparshi Appeal (A Heart-Rending Appeal from a Bengali girl) was a graphic account of a Hindu lady from Noakhali allegedly raped by Muslims in front of her father, father-in-law and children. More than 71 years, later it still makes a chilling read as the lady of the pamphlet makes a fervent appeal to the Shankaracharyas and asks them what happened to their dharma and berates her Hindu brothers for not having blood hot enough to boil on



the travails of their sister.

The colonial administration of Bengal and the United Provinces could never find who the lady was or the source of the publication. What got discovered was the choreography among the Hindu Mahasabha, Gita Press and other organisations in publishing and disseminating the pamphlet with the goal of fomenting communal

The pamphlet made an innocuous appearance in the Malaviya Ank of Kalyan (the monthly journal of Gita Press) in 1946. It was a special issue of Kalyan in honour of Madan Mohan Malaviya. Kalyan's circulation of over two lakh a month and a charged atmosphere did the trick. The pamphlet became the talk of the province. By the time the provincial government could be alerted, thousands of pamphlets were discovered by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to have been published and printed at Allahabad by the secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha,

Prayag. The CID told the provincial administration that the pamphlet "appeals to Hindus and specially to Hindu women to counter the Muslim tyranny with the sword."

The CID was in favour of proscribing that issue of Kalvan. F.R. Stockwell of the CID told Home Secretary Rajeshwar Dayal that "Kalyan has a very wide circulation in India and the effect of the article mentioned may be extremely bad." Averse to taking any stern action, Dayal came up with a middle-ofthe road solution. Admitting that the implications of the article could be "unfortunate", he also said it was "profitless to take any action in respect of the October issue which is already in circulation." The district magistrate of Gorakhpur was asked to warn the editor, Hanuman Prasad Poddar, to refrain from "future publication of such incitory matter...

But the fake news had assumed a life of its own, throwing the police and the CID into a tizzy. Soon, 4,000 more copies of the pamphlet were discovered printed by Kailash Press under the aegis of the Hindu Mahasabha and also by Central Press, Allahabad. Stockwell renewed the demand for proscribing Kalyan and even imposing a big fine. He had the support of Allahabad Collector T.B. Crossley but Dayal was being cautious, or maybe soft. Meanwhile, Kalyan the journal of bhakti (devotion), gyan (knowledge) and vairagya (asceticism) - continued to spew

venom, listing out incidents of Muslim excesses of rape and arson in subsequent issues. În December 1946, Poddar admitted that many of the incidents of violence mentioned in his November article did not take place. But Dayal was in a forgiving mood and did not even take a note of Poddar's admission.

Fake pamphlet news had become real now. G.C. Drewe, Home Secretary of the Bombay government, found the pamphlet published in Mahratta of Poona in December 1946. He proposed to take action against Mahratta under the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act, 1931. But he was limited by the fact that the United Provinces government had taken no action. Dayal did not budge. But the news of the pamphlet had become real by now with many publications reporting on it.

The biggest irony was yet to take place. Raghavacharya Swami of the Ramanuj Sampraday took up the cudgels on behalf of Gita Press and others and petitioned the governor of the United Provinces saying that proscribing Kalyan was nothing but "encroachment of the liberty of expression of opinion". Four months before Independence, the pamphlet was distributed again in Gwalior. But now it was about the freedom of the Fourth Estate. Fake news had won.

Akshaya Mukul is a researcher and the author of Gita Press and the Making of

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.

Cooling off?

The Ministry of External Affairs decision to make use of diplomatic channels to resolve the stand-off between India and China is the right one as it underlines the fact that war is not a remedy to resolve border issues (July 14). It reminds us of the situation during the 1962 war when E.M.S. Namboodiripad was labelled "a China spy" for his remark that the border issue should be resolved through bilateral peace talks. After the war, his argument was recognised to be relevant. Any war will only present us with huge casualties and destruction. Varkala, Kerala

■ Restraint is the only key to improving India-China relations; sabre-rattling will take us nowhere. At every confrontation, it is India that seems to "blink and then go hysterical". Incursions by either side, deliberate or otherwise, are a regular occurrence along the border. Chinese "loose

talk" on war reflects its nervousness and India's talk of "war on two and a half fronts" is equally unwarranted. No war is worth the misery because China will always remain our neighbour and every act of hostility will only add to the "bitterness that will last beyond generations". We are two of the oldest civilizations. It is time to rescue the Indian reading of China from defence analysts, security experts, technocrats and sentimentalists. C.V. VENUGOPALAN,

The article, "The writer's

They live on

building" (Friday Review, July 14), on how the R.K. Narayan memorial in Mysuru can be the perfect venue for literary activities, presents an idea worth pursuing. I would like to add that the childhood home of Kuvempu (Kuppalli Venkatappa Puttappa) at Kuppalli, a remote village in Teerthahalli taluk, Shimoga district, Karnataka, has

been converted into a museum by the Rashtrakavi Kuvempu Pratishtana, a trust dedicated to Kuvempu. Kota Shivaram Karanth, described as the "finest novelist-activist of modern India", has also not been forgotten. His house. 'Balavana', in Puttur, Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka is now a memorial maintained by the government. A part of it

has been made an educational institute for local children. I also understand that the building, in Dharwad, Karnataka, where D.R. Bendre, Jnanpith awardee in Kannada, and his friends used to meet is also a memorial.

K.C. KALKURA, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

Aadhaar woes The Income Tax

department's insistence on linking Aadhaar cards with PAN cards is creating a lot of confusion and misery for most people, especially senior citizens. Many got

their PAN cards years ago and Aadhaar cards only very recently. Therefore, there is bound to be a mismatch in the data such as the names and initials of card holders. The centres offering corrections in the cards are unable to make the necessary changes. The IT department should come out with proper guidelines to solve the Aadhaar-PAN jinx. A. BALAGANGADHARAN.

■ When we registered for and got our Aadhaar cards made some years ago, it was done at a fast pace and dispatched quickly by post. Little did we know or realise that one's biometric – the fingerprint – will be the key factor. This has resulted in tasks as simple as getting one's mobile number incorporated becoming an impossibility. We have been told that fingerprints "vanish with age and are affected by skin blemishes and infections". Another bizarre explanation is of "one's biometrics being

locked out after five attempts". Someone needs to decipher all this. How easy is recording, usage and retrieval of one's fingerprints? And are all these reasons given true? Most senior citizens have a difficult time using technology. Therefore, the officials in charge need to clear the air. Biometric data that can be used easily, especially by senior citizens, should be considered. REVATHI SANKAR,

In a country where men cricketers are being celebrated with much fanfare and worshipped as

Face of women's cricket demigods, the

attention, the recognition and the appreciation they deserve Mithali Raj, who remained Indian women's cricket's

achievements of women

cricketers hardly get the

dominant face for 19 years, has now inspired many with her feat of scoring 6,000 runs in one-day international cricket. She has carved a niche for herself with her consistent and improved performance in every innings she has played. She will remain an inspiring personality for her teammates and all budding women cricketers in the country.

M. JEYARAM, holavandan, Tamil Nadu

MORE LETTERS ONLINE

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the report headlined "Karnataka CM to order probe against prison officials" (July 14, 2017, some editions), V.K. Sasikala was erroneously referred to as AICC General Secretary instead of AIADMK

The second deck headline of the report, "Vande Mataram was in Sanskrit, AG clarifies" (July 14, 2017, some editions), erroneously said the song was translated into Bengali later. It was transliterated into Bengali

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Maximum support, maximum price

What makes the farmer toil, sweat and battle the elements arraigned against him? And what does he expect of the government? **Vikas Pathak** makes pit stops while tailing the ongoing farmers' yatra through Barwani, Ahmednagar, Nashik and Surat to find out

It is past noon and the Sardar wholesale agricultural market in Surat is bustling with activity. Trucks drive in every minute and so do lorries smaller in size. Farmers arrive in these with loads of agricultural produce to sell. The place has multiple rows of platforms interspersed with streets and parking spots. Each platform is dedicated to different kinds of produce: onion, fruits, vegetables, etc. Things move with clockwork precision. Daily-wage labourers offload the sacks of farm produce from trucks, dumping them in huge heaps on the floor of the platforms. A different set of merchants buys this grain and transports it from here, to be sold in towns nearby. The merchants registered here who act as conduits for the sale take a 6% commission on the produce sold. The rest goes to the farmer, and is delivered in cash on the second or fourth

This correspondent - who accompanied the ongoing yatra of farmers' organisations from Madhya Pradesh to Delhi through parts of Maharashtra and Guiarat – took a detour to talk to people at this wholesale market to make sense of agricultural marketing operations.

Ebb and flow of prices

The place is a market seeing daily fluctuations of prices, based on demand and supply. If a greater quantity of a crop comes to the market on a given day and fewer merchants land up to buy it, the price falls. If more merchants come and there is dearth of a commodity, the price rises. Farmers benefit from a higher price and return disappointed if the prices are low. The prices fluctuate even within a day. To sell for a good price is like being lucky in a draw of lots.

Rakesh Bhambre and Sunil Sonone, who have driven down in a rented truck from Daswel village of the Baglan taluka in Nashik district of Maharashtra, have had a hectic day. They arrived here at 2 a.m. Through the morning, they have sold their onions, which were harvested in April, and have managed to get a price of ₹6-7 per kg, which is not bad. They will now head back to their village in a bit. The merchant will send them the money for their produce in cash two days from now, which another truck coming from their village will deliver to

The two Nashik farmers say they engage only in farming and have no side work to do. Their annual calendar is hectic. In June/July and October, they sow sugar cane, which requires a lot of water and takes close to nine months to be ready. This year isn't a good one for sugar cane, they fear, as it isn't raining yet. They sow onion in August and also in November. They have brought the harvest of their November crop of onion here, they say. The advantage with onion is that it can also be stored for four-five months.

They also sow tomato in June and July, and the crop takes two months to be ready.

The agricultural process requires a variety of expenses. They need to buy seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and machines on hire for harvesting. They have to pay the bills for power consumed while watering their fields. They also need to hire labour for various operations, from preparing the fields, taking care of the crop to loading the produce on to trucks. Labour charges range from ₹70-100 a day.

These expenses – varying for different crops - are facilitated both by the money they get by selling their previous produce in the market and by borrowing from cooperative banks, nationalised banks and regional rural banks at an interest of around 7%. Sometimes, they have to borrow from private merchants too, at a higher rate of interest on a monthly basis. Most farmers are under debt of a few lakhs, and sometimes borrow from one lender to pay another. A good crop and remunerative prices a matter of chance – can lead to better incomes. A slump in prices of a crop or erratic monsoon can lead to loss.

The variegated world of farmers

This year, farmers in Nimaad region of Madhya Pradesh and in adjoining parts of Maharashtra - like Nashik and Ahmednagar – are still awaiting rains. If it does not rain for another week, they say, their crops will be damaged. Villages, of course, have farmers of varying means. The richer ones have more land - perhaps 20 acres - and can try three or four kinds of crops in their fields. If one fails, they believe the other will not. The smaller farmers find it harder to get

The truck in which Bhambre and Sonone brought their produce to Surat has been hired from a bigger farmer of their village, who owns trucks and hires

These two farmers – each owning 7-8 acres of land – however spend the year in farming, both with their family labour and hired daily wagers. The poorest in villages own no land of their

own, and work on the fields of others. The wealthier farmers have also diversified into related occupations and other businesses as an additional cushion, as farming is not very lucrative and yields and prices are unpredictable. The poorest in the agricultural world either work others' fields or do additional work as rickshaw pullers, construction



proposition." (Above and three-column image below) Pictures show the Sardar wholesale agricultural market, in Surat, Gujarat. • R.V. MOORTHY



workers, etc., sometimes becoming poor migrants. Hours before reaching the Surat market, this correspondent visited Koribhartna village near Surat, where daily wagers were working the fields of a richer farmer where okra was being grown. Dinesh, a daily-wage labourer of the village with no land of his own, said he works through the year at a daily wage of ₹100. He gets one or the other agricultural work through the year, he says, but adds that the money he earns is not enough for maintaining his family well.

Pandane village in Nashik district is situated close to a dam from where it gets what villagers complain is sandlaced water. Pradip Shivaji Chitte, whose joint family has 7.5-acres of land, of which he works on just 2.5, has opened a small shop dealing in seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. He rented this shop two months ago in a bid to diversify beyond farming. "I invested ₹1 lakh in this; some of my friends also contributed," he says. "But till now, I am just being able to break even." Chitte says he is under ₹16-lakh debt and practises grape farming in the village. "In our village, half the farming is grape farming; the rest is of all other crops," he says.

Just preparing the fields for the crops entails a labour charge of ₹20,000 per acre, he claims. The fields are prepared from September and the harvest comes only by January, before which the crop requires a lot of care. "The total expense, including labour, fertilisers and pesticides, comes to ₹1.6-1.7 lakh per acre. The selling of the produce begins from January and it sells at about ₹18-25 per kg. If one subtracts the expense borne from the selling price per acre, the profit is ₹45,000-50,000. This is the annual income for growing grapes per acre." Chitte says bigger farmers aiming at exports prepare their fields a month earlier - they also get higher prices when they sell their produce, he adds.

Farmers in the Nimaad region of Madhya Pradesh also grow hybrid crops like Bt cotton.

The same is the case in neighbouring

districts of Maharashtra like Nashik. Jagdish Patidar, who came to Barwani for a day from Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh to take part in the ongoing rally of farmers' organisations, says he too grows Bt cotton, which requires more supply of water and higher input costs. What they look for is higher prices for their produce.

"Bt cotton costs more but is high yield and therefore more lucrative for farmers. When a new variety that is advertised as high yield comes, farmers will take to it for profits," says Lakhwinder Singh, an agriculture expert at Punjabi University, Patiala. Many farmers also took to it as it was advertised as resistant to bollworm, a pest that affected cotton. However, Singh cautions, the pest resistance is only for three-four

Agitations and farmers' yatra

The ongoing farmers' agitations are demanding state support for making farming more lucrative. They demand that the M.S. Swaminathan Committee's recommendation - that the governmentannounced minimum support price (MSP) should be 1.5-times the cost of production – be implemented. They are also demanding farm loan waiver, as many farmers are under large debt. However, a loan waiver does not ease



"Unless there is a procurement guarantee and the farmer can purchase his produce, the MSP has little meaning on the ground,"

Former Maharashtra State Planning Commission member

the burden of loans taken from private

Till July 14, a Kisan Mukti Yatra involving several farmers' organisations has been moving through Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan, addressing villagers and articulating these demands. The participants argue that while input costs for farming have been rising, the rise in MSP has

Yogendra Yadav, Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar, Maharashtra farmer leader Raju Shetti, the All India Kisan Sabha, Kisan Sangharsh Morcha, Bhartiva Kisan Union of Punjab, and other organisations are taking part in the yatra, which will converge on Jantar Mantar in Delhi on July 18. It began in Madhya Pradesh, with the farmers' leaders being detained for a few hours by the police, and passed through Indore, Barwani – visiting village Barda, which is in the submergence zone of the Sardar Sarovar dam -Nashik, Vyara and Surat in Gujarat, Bhilwara and Jaipur in Rajasthan, among other places. There are regular halts to interact with people, with crowds varying from a few hundred to a few thousand turning up.

The yatra comes close on the heels of preserving the produce.

Making farming sustainable The journey shows one thing – that

It may become a heated debate politically, but an answer to non-remunerat-

been sluggish.

Swaraj Abhiyan leader and academic

the deaths of six farmers in police action in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, and a strike by Maharashtra farmers early in June, when they decided to let their farm produce and milk perish but not sell it in the absence of lucrative prices. The strike was broken in 48 hours after talks with the Maharashtra government, which made a few announcements: loan waivers for small and debt-ridden farmers; a Bill to criminalise buying produce at rates below the MSP; the setting up of a State Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices on the lines of the Centre to look into MSP issues. The State government also offered to subsidise farmers' power bills, hike milk prices and set up cold storage chains for

"Prices fluctuate even within a day. To sell for a good price is like being lucky in a draw of lots." farming, which sustains more than half

of India's population even if many of them also do other things on the side for supplementary income, is not a lucrative proposition. Farmlands have become smaller over generations and, except for large farmers, many do not find it rewarding but find themselves illtrained for other occupations, says Patidar, the farmer from Maheshwar. Farmers, however, do have an emo-

tional attachment to farming. Their fortunes depend on many things: rains, prevailing prices, and how indebted they become. Lakhwinder Singh says that the answer to the agrarian unease is either subsidies on input costs or higher prices. He says farmers need to spend not just on farming but also on services like education and health. Unless their expenses go down or incomes go up, discontent is expected, he adds. "Everything from health and education to seeds that were public services once are private services now. Farmers get into this loop of rising costs of living," he explains.

"In Punjab, the government purchases all wheat and rice crops at the MSP. This, being scientifically calculated, can enable farmers to have some incomes that make agriculture meaningful. But the same procurement guarantee applies neither to all crops nor to all States, which makes farming less lucrative as an occupation," says Lakhwinder Singh.

Farmers in Madhya Pradesh say that government procurement centres are opened late, often a month and a half after a crop is ready. But farmers cannot store it all in their fields near their homes. They try to sell their crop soon after harvest to merchants, and often get prices below the MSP. "If government centres were to start as soon as the harvest came, we would get better prices," says Patidar.

The troubles don't end here. Patidar says not all the produce is bought by these centres; it may be rejected on grounds of quality. Suraj, a young farmer from Naraula village in Barwani district, says that there is much paperwork in these centres to ascertain the quantity of land on which the crop was sown, the yield, and to verify that the produce indeed belongs to the farmer vho brought it.

"Unless there is a procurement guarantee and the farmer can count on the government to purchase his produce, the MSP has little meaning on the ground," says former Maharashtra State Planning Commission member and economist H.M. Desarda. Lakhwinder Singh adds that if the government undertakes to purchase all major crops at the MSP, farmers will be better off. But will this not push prices of farm

produce bought by consumers upward? Lakhwinder Singh disagrees. He says the large number of middlemen in the supply chain do not anyway let vegetable and grain prices reflect the prices at which farmers are selling them. The long-term answer to farmers' indebtedness, he adds, is a rise in their incomes.

ive farming may take longer to come.