

World

India's farmers are seeking relief at the polls

NASHIK, INDIA

Millions of rural families are ailing as government's promises go unfulfilled

BY VINDU GOEL
AND HARI KUMAR

Fed up with unfulfilled government promises to improve their lives, 35,000 farmers came in from their fields around the city of Nashik last year and marched 100 miles to Mumbai to demand help.

State leaders from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party quickly promised to address their concerns — guaranteeing better crop prices, waiving farm loans and improving other assistance — and then quickly sent them home. But for many, things only got worse.

Now, as India holds the world's biggest election and Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party seeks another five years in power, hundreds of millions of farmers will have the chance to express their frustration at the ballot box.

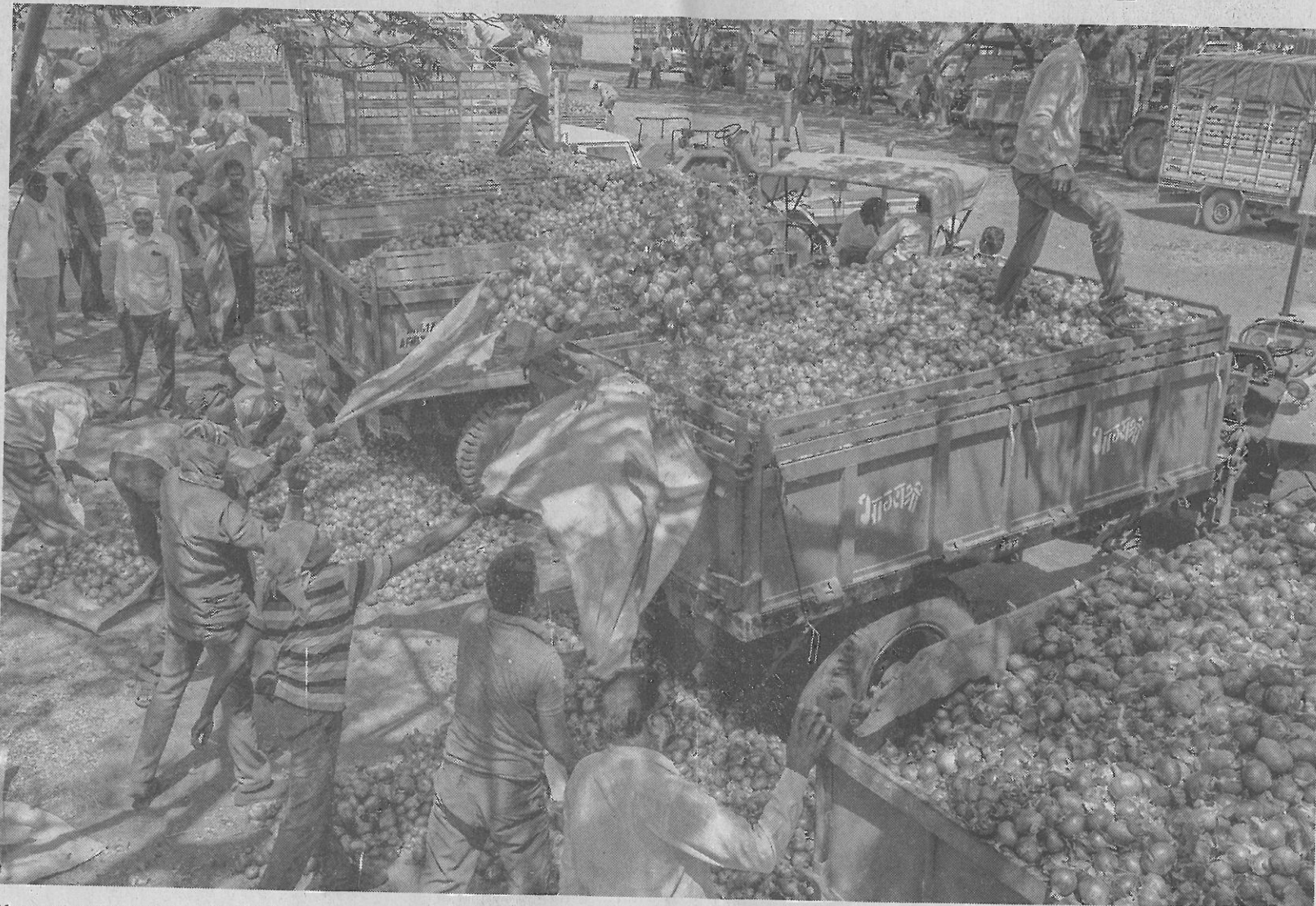
They are a big and suffering constituency: More than half of India's 1.3 billion people still depend in some way on farming, even though agriculture accounts for only 17 percent of the economy. The country has struggled to create new jobs in manufacturing and services to make rural families less dependent on the land.

Government policies under Mr. Modi and the B.J.P. have complicated matters. Worried about the bouts of double-digit food inflation that hurt the previous government, the B.J.P. has focused on maintaining low consumer prices by encouraging production, curbing exports and promoting imports.

After several years of drought that had left many growers with big losses, the supply of crops like onions and legumes exploded last year, sending prices plunging. That was a godsend for many poor Indians. But farmers suffered, and the government largely reneged on promises to buy their crops at prices high enough to ensure a profit.

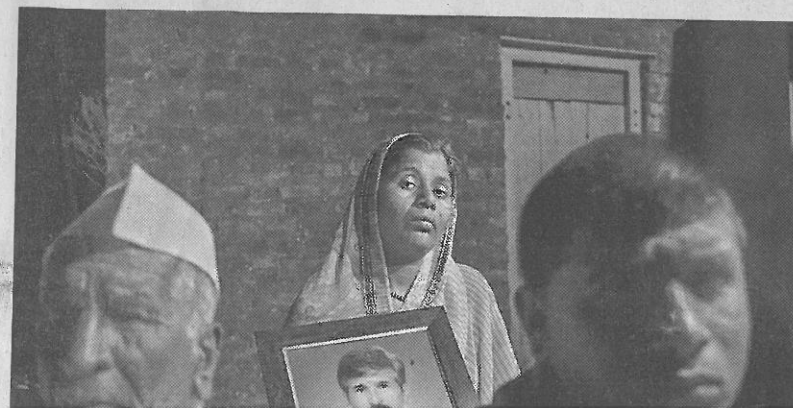
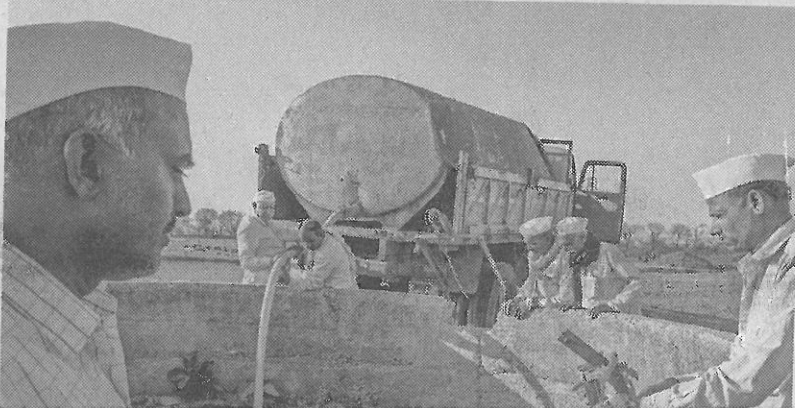
"In the name of the poor, you have robbed the farmer," said Ashok Gulati, a prominent Indian agricultural economist who has occasionally advised the current government. Now, B.J.P. candidates "are facing the music," he said.

With the voting underway across In-



Above, an onion market near Nashik, India. When the price of onions fell last year, the government reneged on promises to buy them at a profit for farmers. Below right, Hirabi Kalkar holding a picture of her husband, Bhausaheb Shivaji Kalkar, a farmer who hanged himself after amassing debts. Below left, distributing water at a village near Nashik.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



and soybeans. While grapes require less water and can command high prices, the transition requires heavy investment and a wait of three years for the first harvest.

In Mr. Kalkar's case, said his widow, Hirabi, their first crop was destroyed by a hailstorm, and their second fetched low prices amid a grape glut. One day before he killed himself, the bankers visited. "They threatened to seize the land," Ms. Kalkar said, sitting on the floor of their two-room house, a photo of her husband hanging on the wall.

Like most of their neighbors, the family survives by picking up casual work beyond the farm. Her 19-year-old son, Pravin, earns about \$100 a month pumping gasoline.

No politician seems to be offering a solution to the Kalkars' problems. Pravin said he did not know whom he would vote for when Nashik goes to the polls on Monday, although the family usually favors Shiv Sena, a right-wing party allied with the B.J.P.

Economists say the best way to provide immediate farm relief would be for the government to eliminate its maze of agricultural subsidies and instead provide direct cash support to rural families.

Longer term, they argue, tens of millions of people must move off the land and into manufacturing and service jobs — the model followed by China, Southeast Asia and much of Latin America to modernize their economies.

"You have to create more jobs outside agriculture," said Pramod Joshi, director for South Asia at the International Food Policy Research Institute in New Delhi.

During his last campaign, Mr. Modi promised to add 10 million jobs. The economy has most likely fallen short of that target, although by how much is unknown, since the government has blocked the release of official employment data, claiming that it is unreliable.

Manish Rawal, director of V.M. Auto Parts in Nashik and a leader of the local industry trade group, said the number of jobs in the urban area, which has about 1.5 million residents, had fallen since early 2018.

He has seen the decline firsthand in orders for the vehicle transmission parts he provides to tractor and truck makers. "Commercial vehicle sales are declining," Mr. Rawal said.

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With the voting underway across India, both the B.J.P. and its main rival, the Indian National Congress, are urgently courting farmers. Mr. Modi has reiterated his 2016 promise to double farmers' incomes by 2022, while his Congress rival, Rahul Gandhi, has pledged a nationwide loan waiver and more nonfarm work for people living in rural areas.

Tukaram Namdeo Gaikwad, one of the farmers from Nashik who marched to Mumbai last year, was unimpressed.

"They talk about the farmers' welfare, but they don't do anything," he said during a rally for Jiva Pandu Gavit, the lone Communist in the Maharashtra State Legislature.

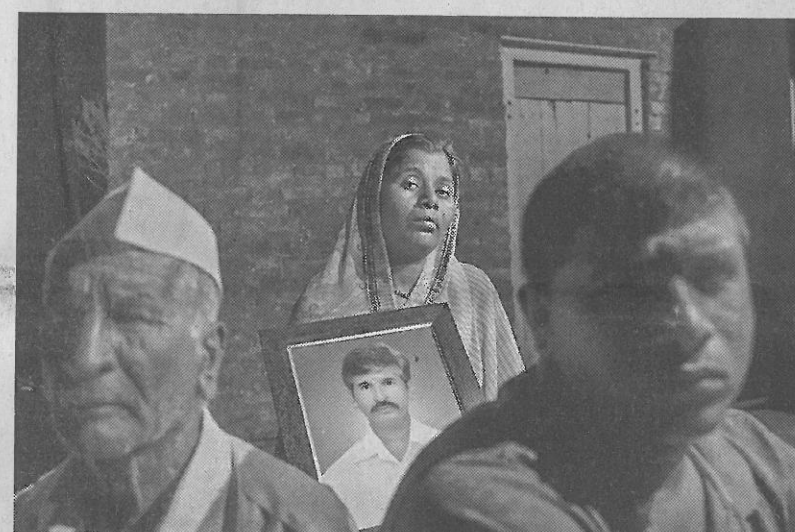
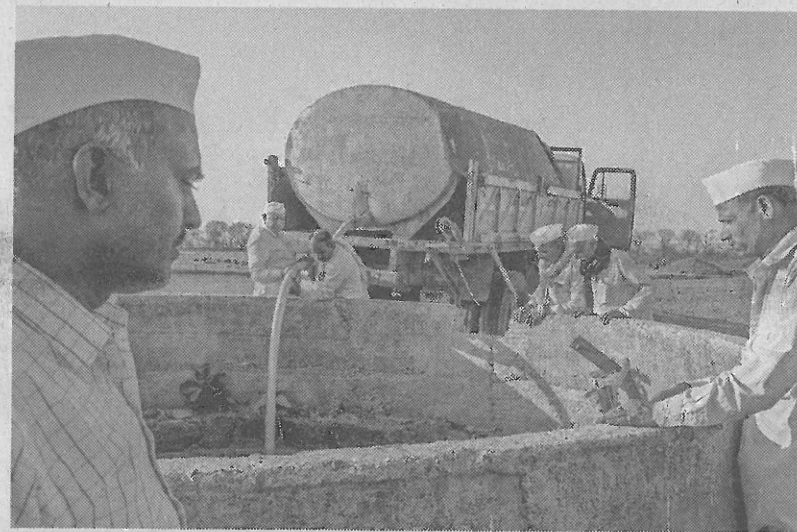
Mr. Gaikwad said he would vote for Mr. Gavit, who helped lead the 2018 march and is now trying to wrest a seat in Parliament from the B.J.P.

A spokesman for the State of Maharashtra, which includes Mumbai, said



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that the government had made progress on farmers' demands, including granting titles to farm public land to 43,600 people, purchasing legumes and soybeans from nearly 93,000 growers, and approving new irrigation projects.

As proof of his commitment to the rural poor, Mr. Modi has also pointed during his campaign to his national programs to bring electricity, toilets and health care to everyone.

But Mr. Modi has also acknowledged his government's failures to meet farmers' expectations. Campaigning in Uttar Pradesh last month, he admitted that the government owed sugar cane grow-

ers in the state more than \$1.4 billion in unpaid price guarantees and vowed to make it right.

In December, onion prices fell as low as a penny per pound, prompting one grower near Nashik, Sanjay Sathe, to send Mr. Modi the 1,064 rupees — about \$15 — that he received for a whole truckload.

Mr. Sathe said this month that the government announces many aid programs, such as fertilizer subsidies and minimum sale prices, yet farmers never seem to reap the benefits. "Those schemes cannot be implemented on the ground," he said.

Crop insurance, which planters must buy to get a bank loan, has enriched insurers even as farmers complain that their payments are often delayed or too small when their crops are wiped out.

And even Mr. Modi's pre-election program to give small landholders 6,000 rupees per year — about \$87 — has not yet reached most people, farmers said.

Meanwhile, many farm families are struggling with debt. One banker in Nashik estimated that nearly half of the farm loans outstanding were not being repaid.

The state's loan waiver program provides little relief to the neediest farmers

since it forgives just a sliver of their total debts. In desperate times, some farmers have turned to suicide, troubling local officials. In Nashik district, where the main crop is onions, 108 farmers killed themselves last year, up sharply from 2014, officials said. The deaths have continued this year.

Early on March 7, Bhausaheb Shivaji Kalkar, 44, hanged himself from a tree in his front yard — the third farmer in his small village to kill himself in the past five years. Mr. Kalkar had amassed debts of more than one million rupees, or about \$14,000, as he tried to switch his two-acre farm to grapes from onions

and soybeans. While grapes require less water and can command high prices, the transition requires heavy investment and a wait of three years for the first harvest.

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One alternative is to create more agribusinesses like Sahyadri Farms, a food processing company outside the city that is owned by its more than 6,600 member farmers.

One morning in early April, about 1,400 people were on Sahyadri's factory floor washing grapes and packing them into plastic containers. By the end of the day, 19 tons of grapes were on their way to Europe, the Middle East and China.

The company guarantees to buy produce at a fair price from its member farmers, who share in the profits. Sahyadri provides advice, sells supplies like fertilizer, lines up loans and even sends trained pickers to harvest the best grapes for export.

"Ultimately, this value chain has to be controlled by the farmers," said Tushar Jagtap, the company's senior manager for farm operations.

Maria Abi-Habib contributed reporting from New Delhi.