

International tourism hits 97% of pre-covid levels in early 2024

Madrid: International tourist arrivals surged to 97 per cent of pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2024, with projections indicating that numbers are expected to exceed those of 2019 over the rest of the year, the UN Tourism reported. The Madrid-based organisation's report shows that 285 million tourists made international trips between January and March, marking an increase of around 20 per cent compared to the same period in 2023. UN Tourism anticipates a "full recovery of international tourism" or the rest of the year, "with arrivals growing two per cent above 2019 levels". International arrivals in the Asia and Pacific region saw a significant rise, from 65 per cent of 2019 levels in the first quarter of 2023 to 82 per cent in the first three months of this year, Xinhua news agency reported.

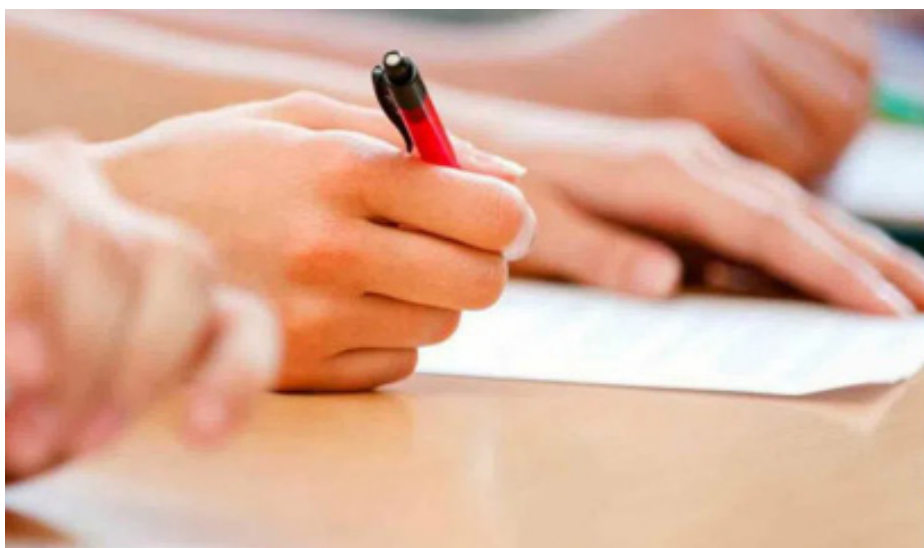
There was also strong growth in the Middle East where international tourism

was 36 per cent higher than pre-pandemic levels while Europe received 120 million international tourists, also representing a one per cent rise from that of 2019. Africa saw a five per cent increase compared with the same period in 2023 while international tourism in the Americas reached 99 per cent of 2019 levels. Welcoming the results, Secretary General of UN Tourism Zurab Pololikashvili highlighted their positive impact on local economies. "The recovery of the sector is very welcome news for our economies and the livelihoods of millions," he said while stressing the need to "advance sustainability and inclusion while addressing the externalities and impact of the sector on resources and communities". Total export revenues from international tourism, including both receipts and passenger transport, reached \$1.7 trillion in 2023, about 96 per cent of pre-pandemic levels in real terms. Tour-



ism direct GDP recovered pre-pandemic levels, reaching an estimated \$3.3 trillion in 2023, equivalent to three per cent of global GDP.

5 minutes of grace time for students appearing for Inter Supplementary Exams



Hyderabad: One-minute late norm has been relaxed for the Intermediate Public Advanced Supplementary Exams (IPASE) commencing Friday. Students will be given five minutes of grace time to enter the centres.

Students appearing for first-year examination will be allowed into centres till 9.05 am while the exam commences at 9 am. Similarly, candidates will be permitted till 2.35 pm for the second-year exams that will be conducted from 2.30 pm. "The TSBIE

relaxed one minute late norm for the IPE March and the same will be extended to supplementary exams. Only five minutes of grace time will be given to students," said a senior official of TS BIE.

A total of 4.6 lakh first and second-year students registered for the examinations are scheduled to be held from May 24 to June 3 with first year exams in the morning session from 9 am to 12 noon and second-year exams from 2.30 pm to 5.30 pm. Nearly 900 centres have been ar-

anged across the State for smooth conduct of the exams. Students have been advised to reach at least one hour prior to the commencement of the examination. Hall tickets have already been uploaded on the website tsbie.cgg.gov.in and students can download the same.

Candidates were asked to check correctness of photo, signature, name, medium, subject appearing etc., indicated in the hall tickets. If any discrepancy is observed in the hall ticket it has to be brought to the notice of the college principal or district intermediate education officer con-

cerned immediately and get it corrected.

The chief superintendents of centres were already instructed to allow students who downloaded hall tickets to appear for the exams even without the principal's signature on hall ticket.

Meanwhile, city police imposed the 144 section prohibiting assembly of persons around all IPASE centres in the city. As per the order issued by Mann, the 144 section will be in force from 6 am on May 24 to 6 am on June 4. Any person violating the order will be liable for prosecution under section 144 Cr. PC.

TSRTC merger process delayed

Hyderabad: The State government appears to have put the TSRTC merger process on a backburner leading to concern among the transport corporation employees.

Even after six months of coming to power, the Congress government is maintaining a studied silence on the issue raising the hackles of the RTC employees. The government has to finalise the procedures for the merger process based on the report of the high level committee appointed by the previous Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government. Once the RTC merger process is completed, the salary burden on the organisation will completely solved. Employees of the corporation will come under Pay Revision Commission (PRC) only if RTC was merged. The salaries also will be on par with that of the government employees. But as the merger process drags on, retiring RTC employees are losing those benefits.

It is learnt that already 1,800 RTC employees have already retired so far since the announcement of the merger. More than 300 employees will retire in next two months.

Phalodi's poll pick: Inside a Rajasthan betting town

SITTING IN his small "office" in the centre of Rajasthan's Phalodi town, the 50-year-old talks up his trade. "You need jigar (guts) to place bets," he says, turning around from the television set that's placed on a drum. These days, with the long-drawn Lok Sabha election finally entering the last few laps, he is putting his "jigar" to good use. As a broker, he is the middleman between parties placing bets and earns a commission of 3 per cent for his "expertise".

Phalodi, a town in western Rajasthan near Jodhpur that is as uncomfortable about its new-found district status as it is about the attention it gets from outsiders wanting to know which way the wind is blowing, is a centre of compulsive punters. Here, every other conversation — about the weather, elections or cricket — ends in a bet. From the action-filled live betting to the more clandestine online betting, Phalodi's satta market, together with the more sophisticated operations that run out of Bikaner, Shekhawati and Pokhran in the region, are estimated to run into hundreds of crores. Betting and gambling are prohibited under the Public Gambling Act, 1867, and "are considered illegal in the majority of regions across the country". Talking about Phalodi's betting prowess, the broker, who spent over two decades in Mumbai as a stock market trader, claims there was a time when the Bombay Stock Exchange was "full of people from Phalodi". A hanger-on sitting outside the office cranes his neck in and adds, "Like everyone in Agra would have been to Taj Mahal, all people in Phalodi have been to Mumbai." The broker claims the Mumbai Police once locked him up, along with dozens of others, for engaging in betting. However, inside the lock-up, the men were undeterred. "We started betting again, but this time on our release," he laughs. Like almost everyone else in Phalodi, he spoke on condition that he not be identified. satta bazaar in bikaner While Phalodi's satta market may have achieved cult status among punters, other centres such as Bikaner are known for being bigger markets (Express photo by Hamza Khan) Phalodi's betting market isn't too different from the stock market in its reaction to electoral events. Just like the stock market recovered after the fourth phase of voting, when the voter turnout numbers recovered after the tepid earlier rounds, the Phalodi satta bazaar's bets on the BJP, which were hovering around 290-292, improved to 303-305 after the fourth phase. Sitting at a shop selling snacks, an elderly resident says, "Now that exit polls are banned, how do you say that the winds are in your favour? You cite Phalodi satta market."

Betting on elections Traditionally, it is said, the people of Phalodi would bet on almost anything, such as two bulls fighting — and there are plenty of bovines in the heart of Phalodi — or which way a flipped slipper would land. These days, however, all discussions are centred on the elections. Especially because last year, the Phalodi

satta market hit the bull's eye with the Rajasthan Assembly elections — a day ahead of the results, Phalodi predicted 115-118 seats for the BJP and 68-70 for Congress. In the results declared the next day, the BJP won 115 and Congress 69. It's another story that Phalodi got its numbers for Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh wrong. His eyes still glued to the television that's playing news on an endless loop, the broker says, "I watch news from 7 am till I go to sleep. We track polling data — we have sources across the country — and we do our own research and analysis. Everyone is connected in this... So you will find that the number (of seats predicted for a particular party) is the same, from here to Mumbai and beyond." betting note A man notes down his bets on a notepad (Express photo by Hamza Khan) The betting mainly takes place in urban Phalodi, which has a sizable number of Pushkarna Brahmins. Overall, the Assembly seat also has Bishnois, Rajputs and Muslims. Most residents are open about their fondness for the BJP. Since 1998, Congress has won this Assembly seat only once, in 2008. Residents, however, say that since betting involves money, they don't give in too easily to political claims. So despite the BJP's stated target of 370 seats, the maximum betting so far has been on 350 seats for the party. The betting market is known to largely regulate itself. "Rajasthan has 25 LS seats and initially, the betting started with 24-25 seats for the BJP. However, as gradually, more people started betting against this figure, it kept dropping and stabilised at 18-19, where the rates for and against are similar," says a broker. Punters also explain the concept of "fog", when the results go beyond all expectations. Like it happened in 1977, when Indira Gandhi lost the elections held after Emergency; in 1991, when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated; and in 2014, when the BJP came to power. The bigger the victory or upset, the bigger the 'fog' and all the bets are called off or a settlement is reached. heritage market "We were fine as a tehsil but they created a district, which has brought us unwanted attention. So it's not called satta market anymore; we now call it Phalodi Heritage Market. I hope that name catches on," Phalodi District Collector Harji Lal Atal says.

In Phalodi, the betting is mostly confined to residents. "We know each other and hence we trust the person to pay up. If someone comes from outside, they have to first pay the entire amount they are betting," says an elder, sitting in the town centre. Another Phalodi resident, who insists he only bets on IPL, says politicians regularly call up their Phalodi 'contacts' for predictions. However, of late, the brokers and the bookies have been growing uncomfortable with all the attention Phalodi has been receiving. "There have been complaints against Phalodi with the Election Commission and there is immense pressure on the district administration to curb betting," says the broker.

Phalodi District Collector Harji Lal Atal



denies any such pressure. He, however, says that instructions have been given to the Superintendent of Police to take action and keep a watch on betting in the district. Last year, then chief minister Ashok Gehlot had announced Phalodi as a district separate from Jodhpur, a move resisted in betting circles here. "We were fine as a tehsil but they created a district, which has brought us unwanted attention. So it's not called satta market anymore; we now call it Phalodi Heritage Market. I hope that name catches on," he says.

It is almost 10 pm on a Monday but the crowd is just beginning to swell at the Gandhi statue in the heart of Phalodi. The chill in the air has prompted the men and the boys to step out of their homes and throng to the centre. What begins as banter gradually turns into shouts of bravado, with people predicting whether it will rain. More men join in, the four blue benches next to the statue are full, and now, there are more men standing than sitting. A local councillor loudly claims that it will rain. As a debate follows, someone in the crowd takes the bait: he says it won't rain. The rate is set at 7.5/1 for a bet of Rs 300, meaning that the councillor will pay the man Rs 300 if it doesn't rain and if it does, the man will pay the councillor Rs 2,250 or 7.5 times 300. This is just one of the many bets that are placed at the town centre. In about 15 minutes, there is a light shower and a noisy cheer spreads through the crowd. The placing of bets is brisker now but the rate has dropped to 2.5/1. As more clouds gather overhead and the wind turns colder, the rate drops to a mere 0.50/1. By now, the rain falls steadily and the crowd noisily shifts to a narrow corner of the street. Overhead, at the lower end of the awning of a closed shop, is a broken tin pipe. As it rains harder, the shouts reach a crescendo. An old man walks up to the far end of the pipe, pulls out a torch, and aims it at the corner. A few seconds later, water streams out of the pipe (locally called patra) and there are more cheers. Wads of cash are pulled out of pockets, counted and exchanged. All the bets have been resolved. brisk betting Brisk betting underway amidst the rains in Phalodi

Apart from rainfall and elections,

Phalodi's other big indulgence is its 'matka' betting. A form of gambling, it involves people betting on three-digit numbers which are written down in small chits with the winning number revealed by a website. In Phalodi, as in the state's bigger towns and cities, it's usually a nondescript shop in the city centre that accepts the matka bets. "There are some who are superstitious, who think that if they roll in the middle of the street, it will improve their chances because they may once have had a fall the day they got a winning matka number," says a Phalodi resident who says he "only occasionally" places these matka bets. In Phalodi, there are as many claims on when and how the town took to betting as there are bets. Prakash Chandra Chhangani, who contested as a Congress candidate from Phalodi in last year's Assembly elections, says betting began with rainfall and moved on to other things. "Since water was scarce, there was little economic activity and people migrated to other parts of the country," he says.

Residents say those who migrated to Mumbai came back with a few tricks. "They taught the locals about trading in foodgrains, silver, etc. Somewhere along the line, betting on rainfall picked up, too, as unlike foodgrains, you didn't have to rely on the radio for the prices," says a resident. Part of the local lore is that elders in Phalodi can sense the smallest of fluctuations in the weather even while they are asleep and that they get up in the middle of the night and head to the town centre to place their bets. "You can even bet on a flood in Phalodi. Now, it may not make any sense and the odds may be against you, but our elders say that Phalodi once got flooded. So if it actually gets flooded now, for a small investment, you can get wind-fall gains," says a Phalodi resident.

Beyond Phalodi While Phalodi's satta market may have achieved cult status among punters, other centres such as Bikaner and Shekhawati are known for being bigger markets. Sitting in a café in Bikaner, a man whisks out his mobile phone and opens his account on a 'secret' website. "The only way you can access this website is if you know the right people," he claims.

Airtel Payments Bank Soars in FY24, Records INR 1,836 Crore of Revenue

Airtel Payments Bank today announced its results for the financial year ended on March 31, 2024, registering an exceptional surge in performance across all metrics, marking a significant milestone in its growth journey.

For FY24, the Bank's revenue soared to INR 1,836 cr, up by 42% YoY, while net profit stood at INR 34.5 cr, up by 60% YoY. The Bank's Monthly Transacting Users (MTU) grew to 80.4 million, propelling customer deposits to surpass INR 2,801 crore, a 50% YoY surge. The Bank's gross merchandise value (GMV) reached INR 2,550 bn.

Airtel Payments Bank registered a substantial Quarter-over-Quarter (Q-o-Q) growth in FY24 revenues, with Q4 (Jan-Mar'23) emerging as the strongest quarter, with revenues of INR 539 crore, a 15% sequential growth over the preceding quarter. The Bank witnessed significant momentum in savings account acquisitions in Q4FY24 and now onboards over a million new customers monthly. Over the past four years, the Bank has experienced rapid growth, achieving a remarkable 40% com-

pound annual growth rate (CAGR) in revenues. Today, the Bank's annualized revenue for March 2024 has surged to INR 2,400 crores, marking an inflexion point. In line with its commitment to innovation, Airtel Payments Bank has introduced new products, including Eco-friendly debit cards, smartwatch, and more catering to evolving customer needs. The Bank's emphasis on safety and security propositions has resulted in a strong demand for its safe daily transaction account offering, further enhancing its service proposition. Airtel Payments Bank is also now a leading player in transit solutions, serving as an exclusive acquiring and issuance partner for five metros and a market leader in FASTag-based parking fee collection at over 100 FASTag-enabled parking sites.

Anubrata Biswas, MD and CEO of Airtel Payments Bank said, "We are delighted to announce yet another year of robust growth for Airtel Payments Bank. Our strong financial performance underscores the trust and confidence placed in us by our customers and partners. As we witness sustained demand for our digital offerings



and accelerate customer acquisitions, we remain steadfast in our mission to empower every Indian with safe, simple and rewarding digital banking services."

Airtel Payments Bank caters to three distinct segments - Urban Digital, Underbanked, and Industries & Institutions- offering comprehensive end-to-end digital banking solutions alongside a bouquet of digital financial services including insurance, lending, and investment solutions. Processing over 8 billion transactions

annually across its platforms, Airtel Payments Bank today stands as the 6th largest player amongst mobile banking users. The Bank addresses the challenge of accessibility by extending banking services to the deepest rural pockets with its largest banking network comprising over 500,000 neighbourhood banking points. Today, Airtel Payments Bank is the largest micro-cash player in the country, digitizing over INR 7,500 cr of cash monthly with over 4,000 corporate partners.

KTR slams Congress govt over firms leaving Telangana



Warangal: BRS working president KT Rama Rao slammed the Congress-led government in Telangana, accusing it of severe mismanagement and failing to fulfill its promises. He pointed out the deteriorating conditions in the State since the Congress came to power in Telangana, including power cuts and discontinuation of ongoing projects, even as several companies were leaving the State.

Interacting with the graduates in Warangal as part of a campaign for Nalgonda-Khammam-Warangal Gradu-

ates constituency bypolls on Wednesday, Rama Rao criticised the Congress government for halting the construction of the new 24-floor building for MGM Hospital, which was meant to be a state-of-the-art facility. "Do we need a government that stops such crucial projects?" he questioned.

He stated that Tech Mahindra leaving Warangal was a significant setback, showing the government's inefficiency to retain existing companies and attract new ones. "Tech Mahindra left Warangal, and

the construction work of the new MGM Hospital stopped. The power is going out frequently in hospitals like existing MGM hospital. Who will be responsible if newborns or ICU patients die due to these power cuts? Is this the change people wanted?" he asked.

The BRS working president said the Congress which made scores of promises to people of Telangana before the Assembly elections, failed to deliver them in full over the last six months. He reminded that

from Rs 500 per quintal bonus for paddy to crop loan waiver of Rs 2 lakh as well as gold and two-wheelers for women to Rythu Bharosa investment support, none of these assurances were fulfilled. He slammed Congress for claiming to provide 2 lakh jobs but failing to issue even one notification. "Revanth Reddy boasts about providing 30,000 jobs, but these are actually the jobs given by the K Chandrashekhara Rao government. This is nothing but deceit," he said. Rama Rao highlighted the delay in disbursement of funds under the Rythu Bandhu scheme and the increased fees for the TET exams as further evidence of Congress's failure. "Farmers and students should think about who supports them in reality. Under K Chandrashekhara Rao, the TET fee was Rs 400; now, it's Rs 2,000," he pointed out. The former Minister urged graduates to vote for BRS candidate Rakesh Reddy, emphasising his qualifications and commitment to public service. "Rakesh Reddy is well-educated, coming from an ordinary family and winning a gold medal at BITS Pilani. In contrast, the Congress candidate has a history of blackmail and criminal charges," he stated, adding that if Rakesh Reddy wins, he will hold the Congress accountable for its promises in the legislative council. He urged them to cast their first priority vote for Rakesh Reddy. "This is not just a vote for one person, but for accountability and progress," he asserted.

Will 'Kisan- Jawan- Pahalwan' Barricade BJP's Win Path?



JAG MOHAN THAKEN

Chandigarh (JAG MOHAN THAKEN), May 22: Has PM Modi smelt the essence of the ground? Are Ram Mandir, Dhara 370 and Hindu-Muslim slogans not working in the desired direction?

Political thinkers analyze that the Ram Mandir, Dhara 370 and Hindu-Muslim slogans do not seem to be giving much positive results for the party and issues of 'Kisan-Jawan Pahlwan' (Farmers- Soldiers and Wrestlers) have eroded these 'Ram Baan' (Medication for every disease) slogans of BJP. And PM Modi has got this point. That is why, now he is focusing more on 'Farmers- Soldiers and Wrestlers' and denying any discrimination with the Muslim community. "The day I start talking about Hindu-Muslim (in politics) will be the day I lose my ability to lead a public life," Modi said, speaking in Hindi. "I will not do Hindu-Muslim. That is my resolve." PM Narendra Modi made these remarks in an interview with CNN-News18. Why Modi had to clarify his stand? What he had said? If he had said nothing provocative and hatred spreading, then why did the Samyukta Kisan Morcha had to demand the removal and prosecution of Prime Minister Narendra Modi? Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella body of farmers' unions in India, in a press release on April 23, 2024, had demanded removal from the PM post and prosecution of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his alleged highly poisonous hate speech at Banswara in Rajasthan on 20th April 2024. SKM had alleged that the Prime Minister had accused all members of the main minority group of the country as 'intruders' without any substance is nothing but insanity that violates the secular constitution that ensures separation of state and religion in governance. Whether PM Modi is really following his words expressed in the News-18 interview? Has he softened his words and not voicing in the manner in which he expressed himself in Rajasthan? Yes, some changes seem there. Now he is not directly bursting against any community, as was alleged earlier, but using the words -- those doing 'vote-jihad'. On May 18, addressing a rally in Haryana, PM Modi alleged that Congress is solely focused on appeasement politics. The manifesto crafted by Congress resembles the entire Muslim League manifesto. Congress claims that they will conduct an X-ray of the public's assets and then distribute those assets to those doing 'vote-jihad'. For wooing 'Farmers- Soldiers and Wrestlers', PM Modi has started to preach the steps taken by the BJP government for the ben-



efit of these segments, who are annoyed with the party due to barbaric behavior of BJP government during farmers' movement and dragging the wrestlers on Delhi roads. PM Narendra Modi, while addressing public meetings in Ambala and Sonapat, Haryana on May 18, criticized the previous Congress government and highlighted various beneficial schemes for farmers in Haryana, initiated by the BJP government. Modi highlighted that before 2014, the Congress-led government had purchased grains from farmers at MSP worth only ₹7.5 lakh crore. In contrast, during the 10 years of the Modi government, agricultural produce worth ₹20 lakh crore has been procured from farmers at MSP. Previously, farmers often faced delays in receiving payments, but now the funds are directly deposited into their bank accounts. Congress has only betrayed sugarcane farmers. Presently, the FRP for sugarcane stands at nearly ₹350 per quintal, while the Congress government used to offer around ₹210 per quintal. Modi divulged that in 2014, when the BJP took office, the pending dues for sugarcane were approximately ₹60,000 crore. Contrastingly, this year, the government has cleared payments amounting to ₹1 lakh 14 thousand crore. Over ₹650 crore have been directly transferred to the accounts of farmers in Ambala, Karnal and Kurukshetra under the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi. To show his government's affinity towards sports and sportspersons, PM Modi claimed that after forming the government in 2014, the BJP government increased the sports budget threefold, encouraging the youth to play more and win more medals. Whether it's building top-notch training centers in India or sending athletes abroad for training, the Modi government spares no expense in supporting athletes. Currently, thousands of athletes receive over ₹50,000 monthly under the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) from the government. It is because of such initiatives, India has won the most Olympic medals to date, enhanced its reputation in the Asian Games

and set records in university games. India is now striving to host the 2036 Olympics and soon, the nation will witness the first Olympics in India, with Haryana and Sonapat youth winning gold medals.

To fetch the votes of ex-servicemen from congress basket, PM Modi alleged that Congress betrayed our ex-servicemen. For fourteen years, they made empty promises about "One Rank One Pension," and when they realized that Modi posed to be a significant challenge in 2013, Rahul Gandhi allocated a budget of ₹500 crores for it and held meetings with ex-servicemen in Haryana, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh, spreading confusion. "But we implemented 'One Rank One Pension'. Their habit of lying is deeply ingrained. Our government fulfilled the promise of 'One Rank One Pension' with flying colors when given the opportunity to serve by the people. Everyone should know how Congress lies. Congress allocated ₹500 crores for OROP, but when the BJP government implemented it, more than ₹1 lakh 20 were allocated." But has the people forgotten the death of more than 700 farmers, stating the farmers as terrorists, dragging the wrestlers on Delhi roads and dashing the hope of unemployed youths, who were preparing themselves for joining the Indian forces, by implementing Agni Veer scheme? Dr. Inderjeet Singh National Vice-President of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) says, "BJP election rallies being addressed by Modi and Amit Shah are hardly making any significant impact in the given isolation of BJP from the electorate in general and peasantry in particular. There are reports that Modi's moderately attended rally in Gohana two days ago failed even to boost the BJP workers morale let alone woo the farmers. It was only a gathering of people mobilized with the misuse of power with the help of private school buses. In the backdrop of excesses done during farmers movement and the women wrestlers as well as other sections including police repression meted out to Sarpanches, scheme workers etc. in the

recent past have not faded from the memories of people. Visit of Modi- Shah and other BJP leaders is not cutting ice and deter the electorate suffering from unemployment and acute price rise from punishing BJP cutting across caste /community considerations." R. C Punia, an RTI activist, carrier counselor and a former Gramin Bank Manager, who himself belongs to a farmer family, expresses, "As much as I have been able to know and have heard and talked to the farmers, based on their anger it can be said that most of the farmers in Haryana are now anti-BJP. In Bhiwani and Dadri, all the farmer organizations are campaigning against BJP in their own way. They are protesting vocally in Sirsa and Fatehabad. Protest is also going on in Bhiwani-Dadri. Ex-servicemen have also come together and announced their support to the Congress. The employees are separately causing harm to BJP. Thus, I do not think that the Modi-Shah duo will be able to do any magic. Everyone has made up their mind for change. The real situation will be known on June 4."

Will 'Kisan- Jawan- Pahalwan' resentment darken the BJP's fate?

To provoke the farmers against Congress Party and get sympathy of farmers, especially the 'Jats', Union Home Minister, Amit Shah during his visit to Haryana on 20th May, raised the issue of Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar. "Congress worked to insult the Vice President and son of a Jat farmer Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar who holds a constitutional post." Shah stated that the Congress only talks about the poor but does nothing for their welfare. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi talks about farmers but insulted Shri Jagdeep Dankar, a farmer's son who is a representative leader for the Jat farmers. But, whatever PM Modi or Amit Shah claim, the ground reality seems anti-BJP and the political observers conclude that the 'Kisan- Jawan- Pahalwan' issue is playing its major role to abstain the BJP from returning to power a third time.

Amul goes global: A look at the dairy giant's journey from Kaira to US

"The Taste of India. Now in USA," India's largest dairy co-operative Amul, i.e. Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), declared in a newspaper advertisement on Sunday, May 19. Partnering with the 108-year-old American co-operative organisation Michigan Milk Producers Association (MMPA), Amul is launching four variants of fresh milk in the U.S. market. "Amul Doodh ab piyega America," touts the dairy giant in its advertisement. Announcing its plans to go global on March 25, GCMMF MD Jayen Mehta told PTI, "We have been exporting dairy products for many decades. This is the first time we are launching fresh milk outside India." While the milk collection and processing will be done by MMPA, Amul will take care of branding and marketing its fresh milk products. The initial launch will cover New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Washington, Dallas and Texas, targeting non-resident Indians (NRIs) and the large Asian population in the U.S. Currently, Amul exports dairy products to 50 nations and has 36 lakh dairy farmers as members of its dairy co-operative in India. The milk trade in Anand's Kaira district was blooming in 1945 with the implementation of the Bombay Milk Scheme, with the Bombay government tying up with Polson Limited to supply milk to Bombay from Anand. After the milk was pasteurized in Anand, it had to travel 427 kilometers, via many contractors, suppliers and distributors, before it reached consumers in Mumbai. The tie-up was successful for Polson, the government and the middlemen who kept a major chunk of the profits earned. However, milk prices were not regulated to assure minimum compensation to the dairy farmers, who were forced to sell milk, curd, paneer and ghee at any price demanded by the contractors. After consulting Congress veteran Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the farmers formed a dairy co-operative named 'Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union' in 1946, under the guidance of Mr. Patel's deputy Morarji Desai. Milk co-operatives were formed across all villages in Kaira, with the union collecting milk from its member farmers to sell to the Government. Farmers refused to sell to any milk contractor in the district if the government refused to buy from the union. As the Government refused to budge, and the farmers too remained resolute in their demand, no milk was transported to Bombay from Anand for fifteen days. Finally, the Bombay government relented and the Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union Limited was formally registered on December 14, 1946. Within two years, by June 1948, the union began pasteurizing milk, producing 250 litres of milk via its two village co-operatives and 432 member-farmers. By the end of that year, the union began producing 5000 litres of milk per day.

Amul's growth under Dr. Kurien. Dr. Verghese Kurian, a dairy engineer, arrived in Anand in May 1949 to serve a one-year bond at a government creamery. After he was requested to extend his stay in Anand by the union's chairman Tribhuvandas Patel, Dr. Kurien became actively involved in the union, taking up a post as its Executive Head in 1950. Under his leadership, the union set up a processing plant in

Anand to use the excess milk produced by buffaloes in the winter to produce milk powder and butter. The processing plant helped supplement the farmers' income, and milk products were being produced from buffalo milk – a historic first. The products generated from the processing plant were branded as 'Amul,' derived from the Sanskrit word 'Amulya' which means 'priceless' or 'precious.' From the L&T Silkeborg plate pasteuriser that he installed at the Amul Dairy in 1950, to the state-of-the-art model dairy plant at the National Dairy Research Institute in Karnal, Haryana, Dr. Verghese Kurien has seen it all. From the L&T Silkeborg plate pasteuriser that he installed at the Amul Dairy in 1950, to the state-of-the-art model dairy plant at the National Dairy Research Institute in Karnal, Haryana, Dr. Verghese Kurien has seen it all. After the successful launch of the plant, Dr. Kurien was roped in by the then-Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri to replicate the Amul model throughout the nation. Thoroughly impressed by the co-operative movement used to help dairy farmers in Kaira, Mr. Shastri urged Dr. Kurien to design a project to improve the socio-economic condition of the nation's farmers via the Amul model. Operation Flood (1970-1996) Dr. Kurien, who was now heading the newly-established National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), launched 'Operation Flood' i.e. the White Revolution, implemented in three phases, to help farmers take production, marketing and development of milk and milk products into their own hands. By establishing milk producers' co-operatives in 700 towns and cities, NDDB created a national milk grid, which resulted in increased milk production, augmented rural incomes and offered reasonable prices for consumers. After the implementation of the three phases of 'Operation Flood,' India's dairy co-operative movement had 72,000 societies, with women members and Women's Dairy Co-operative Societies also increasing significantly. With an increased focus on research and development in animal health and nutrition, the productivity of milch animals also increased, leading to India becoming the largest dairy producer in the world. Initially, the Kaira model was expanded to other districts in Gujarat — Mehsana, Banaskantha, Baroda, Sabarkantha, and Surat. Launched in 1970, Operation Flood, spearheaded by Verghese Kurien, who was named the Chairman of NDDB by PM Lal Bahadur Shastri, transformed India from a milk-deficient nation into the world's largest milk producer. Launched in 1970, Operation Flood, spearheaded by Verghese Kurien, who was named the Chairman of NDDB by PM Lal Bahadur Shastri, transformed India from a milk-deficient nation into the world's largest milk producer.

During 'Operation Flood,' the GCMMF was set up in 1973 to market products from all district-level milk cooperative unions in Gujarat, thereby avoiding market competition between producers. The GCMMF re-



ceived the 'Amul' brand from the Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union. Dr. Kurien took over as GCMMF's first Chairman and remained its helm till 2006. And Amul became the largest dairy cooperative, partnering with 36 lakh women dairy farmers across 18,565 village cooperatives in Gujarat. Under his management, Amul expanded its product range, creating chocolates, cheese, baby food, skim milk powder — all from buffalo milk, a first for the dairy industry. With the largest network of dairy farmers, the GCMMF took on dairy giants like Nestlé and Mondelez, ramping up its production capacity to 1000 metric tonne per month at its chocolate plant established in Mogar, Anand in 2018.

Post-Kurien era On March 20, 2006, Dr. Kurien resigned as GCMMF chairman following differences between him and the board of directors. For several years prior, Dr. Kurien had become fiercely protective of the co-operative movement and Amul, as more private players entered the dairy sector in India. As differences of opinion grew, the GCMMF board planned to oust Dr. Kurien by passing a no-confidence motion against him. Cornered, Amul's 'Milkman' Dr. Kurien resigned, drawing curtains on his 35-year tenure birthing and leading Amul. In 2010-11, GCMMF ventured outside Gujarat for procuring milk. Amul currently has satellite dairy plants in Maharashtra, Bihar, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, apart from Gujarat. It also has cattle feed plants in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab, and food processing units in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. By 2023, Amul began procuring 40 lakh litres per day outside Gujarat, while its farmers in the State provide 250-270 lakh litres. From the initial 250 litres, Amul now collects 310 lakh litres per day in peak season. Apart from fresh milk, Amul offers a huge variety of milk products like ice-cream, curd, ghee, butter, paneer, buttermilk, shrikhand, Ultra Heat Treatment (UHT) milk, condensed milk, ghee, milk-based drinks, milk powder, dairy whitener, fresh juices, mocktails, and sweets. It has also expanded into bakery goods, chips and organic foods. Keeping its focus on cattle, Amul offers veteri-

nary products, cattle feed, organic fertilizers, and homeopathic medicines.

With a plethora of products to offer, Amul began exporting its dairy products initially in the 1990s, post-Operation Flood, thereby boosting its turnover. By 2000, Amul's turnover rose to \$500 million, and in 2006-07 it became a billion-dollar cooperative and India's largest exporter of dairy products. Scaling its exports, Amul currently exports its dairy products to over 50 countries. Exports constituted 2% of its total turnover, which was Rs 72,000 crores (\$ 9 billion) in FY 23-24.

Amul diversifies into Green energy In the past decade, Amul has also diversified its focus to biofuel after the Modi government started investing more in green energy. In 2014, Amul's first biogas energy plant was established in Anand's Sundalpur village in Gujarat. Apart from biogas, the plant also produces fertilisers, liquid manure, and herbal pesticides. With an investment of Rs 230 crores, Amul has four such biogas plants in Banaskantha, Gujarat. Speaking to Businessline, GCMMF MD Jayen Mehta said, "The Banas BioCNG Plant has been successfully running for the past three years. It has supplied clean fuel to approximately one lakh CNG vehicles in the district. This initiative not only provides farmers with an additional income source but also offers clean fuel and organic fertiliser. Processing over 3.4 crore kg of dung, it has a sustainable impact on both the agricultural and energy sectors." One of the biggest factors contributing to Amul's success has been its sustained advertising campaign. Since 1966, Adman Sylvester daCunha's iconic noseless girl with blue hair and a red polka-dot frock has been Amul's mascot around the world. The ad campaign, which weighs in on topical news issues (political or otherwise), now holds the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest-running advertising campaign in the world. Focusing on farmers in the 1960s, daCunha branded Amul's ad campaign with his iconic tagline 'Utterly Butterly Delicious,' aiming to dislodge Polson from its prime position in Bombay. Later, he evolved the campaign to keep it topical, effective and economical.

On IPL's big day, two-minute silence for an English amateur, salute to cricket's unpaid loyalists

Last week The Times, London, carried a heartrending obit of Jonathan Mills, a 55-year-old club cricketer. Written by his brother Daniel, the tribute was for the sales executive of a beauty company for whom cricket wasn't about playing for his country or county. A passionately committed cricketer, Jonathan's life and career choices were dictated by season and schedule of his beloved Brookweald Cricket Club. He scored two hundreds as a long-time opener of the club that, as claimed by its website, happens to be in the prettiest part of Essex, serves the best tea in the league, has its own bar and is the perfect place to spend a sunny Saturday afternoon. It's in this picturesque surrounding that Jonathan got the final hundred of his life, which according to his brother was straight from the "golden age of schoolboy magazine stories".

Why remember an English amateur on a day when the game's two biggest icons face-off in the world's biggest and glitziest league? The pull of the quaint village cricket greens is eternal but why move away from the floodlights when Mahendra Singh Dhoni could possibly be playing his last serious cricket game and Virat Kohli was psyched to launch the mother of all IPL comebacks?

But in the middle of this wild party of six-hitters, where the once-rare T20 100s are becoming an everyday possibility, it is worthwhile to recall Jonathan's match winning '110 off 123 balls, with a 21 boundaries' effort for Brookweald CC's second XI against Woodham Mortimer in the local village league. If runs had weight, this would be among the world's heaviest ton. Rarely has a knock meant so very much to one person, and the handful around him. Cricket, and even football, is more than life and death for many, we are told. That's ridiculous, it's a cliché wrapped around by hyperbole. For Jonathan, cricket for about a year or so was the celebration of his short life, as told to him by his oncologist.

Jonathan Mills was diagnosed with cancer last year. He underwent treatment. However, only last week, he received the news that the treatment didn't work ?? Despite this 'Millsy' didn't let it get him down. He opened the batting on Saturday and scored 110! A warrior & a legend ??? pic.twitter.com/D0OJLNLg3

After six months of aggressive treatment of stage four bowel cancer, Jonathan was told that he was among the 45 per cent in the world who didn't react to chemotherapy. His tumours were stubborn, instead of shrinking, they had actually grown. Given six months to live, Jonathan said no to palliative chemo and wanted to return to normal life, which for him meant padding up for his club Brookweald. "I got the diagnosis and thought, 'Well that's it, might as well get a game in,'" he would later say.

He would reach out to his club and they would whole-heartedly welcome him. Being away from cricket for a while, the sportsman in Jonathan would have guilt pangs. Were his team mates giving him a place in the side out of sympathy? The opener in mid-50s had one more reason



to do well. In the limited time on hand, with death said to be creeping towards him, Jonathan wanted to do what he loved the most but not at the cost of his team's fortunes. The fears were unwarranted, he went on to play an emotional innings that had the power to tug the heart-strings of entire England. On the pitch, when Jonathan completed his half-century, he and his opening partner Gary Wolfe were in tears. "I got choked up for him at 50, but didn't think he'd go on to get a hundred to be honest. It really was a special moment. We all felt lucky to be there," Wolfe would tell The Times. The report mentions the short advice Jon's partner Sharon had given him., - "Don't go mad," he was told. "She knows how important it (cricket) is to me." By the time he reached hundred, he was drained out, the impact made by the six chemos on the body was showing. He was too tired to even cry. The picture of Jonathan standing in front of the scoreboard displaying his 110 would go viral. It would get voted as the innings of the season by many websites. Before their game against Kent, Essex would call him to ring the ceremonial pre-game bell. The MCC chairman Stephen Fry would invite him to the Ashes Test at Lord's. "I'll go and have a chat with Mr McCullum and see if he needs any tips," the Bazballing opener Jon would tell BBC Essex's Around The Wicket. Jon, along with his twin, turned up at the ground. "Just very occasionally we get to meet people who remind you how special life is and how to squeeze every last drop out of it," Fry would say. Dressed smartly in a blue shirt and maroon tie, he looked healthy while getting interviewed by Jonathan Agnew for Test Match Special. About a year later, Agnew, a veteran broadcaster who has interacted with virtually the entire cricketing world, would remember his unique guest. "It was a wonderfully inspirational interview, one of those that I'll never forget," said Agnew later.

Jonathan's death throws the spotlight on cricket's large army of unseen and unpaid retainues. They could be among your friends or even living next doors. They also have an uncanny knack of propping up in the many sporting fairy tales cricket throws up. They are those who don't miss weekend games despite aching limbs and rising complaints of neglect from home. They

top gully cricket games to bat for a while and later explain the nuance of the game to the kids. They convince parents to send their talented kids to academies. They keep the game alive, keep its narrative richer. In the case of Jonathan, the game stood by its loyal servant. It became the support system when he needed it the most. There were a couple of poignant Jon comments from the day he raised his bat in defiance. "I thought I would never get to do this again. I feel like I've lost this war, but I'm going to

try to win a few battles on the way out ... I've enjoyed myself. Unfortunately my time is my time, so I want to go out smiling."

He did that at the care-home where, according to his obit, he had fino sherry in the fridge, whisky on the sideboard and old teammates and golfing partners around him. Cricket was giving good old Jon something that was more precious than what the IPL winners would walk away home with after the final on May 26.

A healthy meal isn't always balanced! Expert shares roadmap to ideal diet

Food is fuel, they say, and the better you eat, the healthier you stay. But, in a frenzy to stay healthy, the world is busy running behind new diet and wellness trends, including farm-to-plate organic diets. We often use the words healthy and balanced interchangeably, but did you know that in the world of nutrition, they don't necessarily mean the same? A clinical expert helps us decode the two terms, and shares her blueprint for an ideal diet.

Healthy vs balanced meal: Which is better in terms of nutrition?

Dr Garima Dev Verman, a certified nutritionist and medical content analyst with The Healthy Indian Project (THIP), said that a balanced meal has a mix of different foods, with a variety of nutrients, in the right amounts. "A healthy meal ensures you're getting essential nutrients, while a balanced meal ensures you're getting a variety of nutrients in the right proportions. So, neither is necessarily "better" than the other; it depends on your individual nutritional needs and preferences," she said. healthy Portion sizes can be an issue, with some people overeating certain foods while under-serving others.

Where do people generally go wrong?

Dr Verman said, "People either focus too much on one food group or neglect certain nutrient-rich foods altogether. This imbalance can result in meals lacking essential nutrients, or being too high in certain nutrients, like unhealthy fats or

sugars." Portion sizes can be an issue, with some people overeating certain foods while under-serving others. According to her, striking a balance between different food groups and paying attention to portion sizes are key to preparing a truly balanced meal. Key components of a balanced meal to meet basic Indian nutrition goals, it's important to include a variety of key components in your meals. Dr Verman recommends starting with a generous portion of seasonal vegetables and fruits that provide essential vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Next, one should incorporate whole grains like rice, whole wheat and millets (such as ragi, jowar, and bajra), for energy and important nutrients. "Include protein-rich foods such as lentils (dal), legumes (chickpeas, kidney beans), nuts, seeds, dairy products (milk, yogurt, paneer), eggs, fish, and lean meats to support tissue building and repair," she says. The nutritionist suggested using healthy fats in moderation. Ghee, mustard oil, coconut oil, and nuts are essential for brain health and hormone production. Dairy products or fortified alternatives like soy milk ensure adequate calcium and vitamin D for bone health. Spices and herbs such as turmeric, cumin, coriander, ginger, and garlic not only add flavor to meals but also offer health benefits such as anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Stating the importance of hydration, she encouraged people to include traditional beverages like buttermilk, coconut water, and herbal teas in their regular diet.

What we need is an Anti-Patriarchy Day

International Women's Day is a day to celebrate women's achievements, but we'd like to start with a provocative statement: Should we reframe it as Anti-Patriarchy Day? While it is a day to see how far women have travelled, we believe it is a day to examine what holds us back, especially in terms of systemic challenges for growth. In our opinion, patriarchy represents the biggest systemic challenge. Let's first clarify a definition of patriarchy. It is not about men vs women, as is often understood. It is about men and women, versus a system of holding power that is deeply unfair to women, where both men and women can be complicit in holding women back. Just like the term feminism, patriarchy is an emotive word, but we look at both through the lens of fairness and equality, not through the lens of men vs women.

Within this definition of patriarchy, we see two types: Outright patriarchy where women are visibly excluded from power or gain. For example, cases of sexual harassment or daughters being denied their fair share of inheritance. These are examples where there is little dispute that women are being wronged. Today, we would like to spotlight a subtler — yet equally insidious — form of patriarchy, which we would like to call benign patriarchy. This refers to situations wherein, in the guise of compassion, women's ambitions are stifled by those in more powerful positions. For example, some years ago one of us (Aparna) wanted to write a book about her mental health condition but was told by her senior mental health professional that "she should not write, she should focus on supporting her husband's career or planning the children's summer holidays which she did so well". It was said in the spirit of compassion, as Aparna had experienced several mood swings, but it was patronising and deeply upsetting, as writing was a form of self-expression and healing for her. Another common example is qualified and educated women who are not allowed to choose their profession but are told by their husbands' families that they can work only in the family business. Again, it limits their personal and professional growth. Women can be complicit in imposing benign patriarchy on those around them as well. Megha encountered the mother of a 15-year-old client who sent her daughter to a nutritionist, constantly reiterating that the daughter needs to be "thin and good-looking if she wants to be popular". This client was not obese nor had a health concern. The intention may be to be kind to someone who could be vulnerable, but benign patriarchy actually takes away the kindness that we have for each other, by being patronising and limiting to women.

This system also hurts men, as it forces them into a box of being the more powerful one. In private, men often express their unhappiness at not being allowed to show emotions or their frustration at being judged only by their professional performance. For women, the tactical solution to tackling benign patriarchy often lies in recognising that this is a power issue and that benign patriarchs are operating from their own



contexts and what they perceive to be good intentions. As Robert Greene, author of *The 48 Laws of Power* writes, in situations where the opponent is more powerful, use the surrender tactic: "Law 22. Transform weakness into power. Make surrender a tool of power... Save your hide for a later date when you can reassert your power. Inwardly you stay firm, but outwardly you bend... only appear to surrender."

This is precisely what Aparna did. Although frustrated with her mental health

professional, she continued seeing them, as she was dependent on their medical advice. However, she developed allies in her book club who supported her writing. When she felt stronger a few years later, she switched to a different practitioner who supported her writing and went on to publish a memoir. She continues to stay in touch with the original mental health professional, who now recognises her writing efforts and her new persona as a mental health advocate. The long-term solution is the recognition that benign patriarchy is a

power struggle all around us, often those whom we trust the most. We need to call it out and engage with those in power to influence the way they think. Benign patriarchy is so subtle that often we don't recognise it. This is exactly why we need a day to remind us of it: Anti-Patriarchy Day. On March 8 or any day of the year, because frankly, it happens all year around, everywhere. Aparna Piramal Raje is a writer and public speaker and Megha Mawandia is a Mumbai-based family therapist. The views expressed are personal

Managing our resources with AI

These days, the term Artificial Intelligence (AI) seems to be everywhere. The public has come to view it with mixed perceptions. On one side, it is a problem-solver: AI has helped in monitoring heart problems and eye conditions and offered treatment options; AI predicts protein structure, and aids in the development of new drug molecules. Likewise, it predicts cyclones, monsoon strengths, etc. On the dark side are fears that jobs may be lost to thinking machines that work 24/7 and do not need a Diwali vacation, and may intrude on your privacy and misuse your data. But nobody doubts that AI will help us in addressing large-scale problems that require the analysis of huge data.

As India's development gathers momentum, we are faced with the eventuality of resource limitations. We may need much more than we have. This is especially true of water — every year we see floods in parts of the country, and drought in others. Engineers have long dreamt of building links between our rivers to mitigate these problems. But uncertainties over the effects of such large-scale changes have stalled many initiatives.

Benefits of linking rivers For the nation's planners, minimising the water deficit has become a critical goal in this age of climate change and unpredictable weather. Can AI tools be used to make predictions on how to bring about change? Computational modelers at the IIT-ISM, Dhanbad and the NITs in Tripura and Goa have done just this while examining the proposed Pennar-Palar-Cauvery link canal. This canal is part of a scheme to connect the flood-prone Mahanadi and Godavari rivers with the 'deficit' rivers further south. The link canal would aid half-a-million hectares in a chain of districts, from Nellore in Andhra Pradesh to Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu. Such proposals have a complex set of objectives, which can be modeled in the search for maximum benefits to the most people. Fulfilling many objectives in a multi-objective model, the goal is to achieve more than one objective optimally. For example, a farmer may wish to get the maximum yield of his crop with the minimum use of water. He would tweak his system to a point where he can no longer improve one objective without worsening the other. The IIT-NIT team has presented a model that aims to improve the returns



from farms, without depleting groundwater or wasting the water in rivers and reservoirs (Agricultural Water Management, v-279, 2023). They used data that has been collected over the years by the National Water Development Agency on (a) water levels before and after monsoons in the 1.2 lakh wells and tube wells in these districts; (b) crop-sowing patterns; (c) prevailing minimum support price and the cost and benefits to farmers. This AI-based modeling effort suggests that favourable outcomes will come with a few adjustments to the choice of crops that are grown in the two seasons of July and November. Collecting more detailed data will help such AI-based models in making more focused predictions.

WTO is hanging on to life, but just barely

The 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Abu Dhabi ended with the 166-member organisation adopting a declaration which was so thin on substance that it has not even provided it with a meaningful work programme as ministerial conferences usually do. This leads to the question: Was the Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration adopted merely to ensure that this first ministerial conference on Arab shores in two decades did not add to the list of failed WTO ministerial conferences? Given the WTO's myriad troubles at this juncture, a failed ministerial conference would surely have caused an existential crisis for the organisation. The 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Abu Dhabi ended with the 166-member organisation adopting a declaration which was so thin on substance that it has not even provided it with a meaningful work programme as ministerial conferences usually do. This leads to the question: Was the Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration adopted merely to ensure that this first ministerial conference on Arab shores in two decades did not add to the list of failed WTO ministerial conferences? Given the WTO's myriad troubles at this juncture, a failed ministerial conference would surely have caused an existential crisis for the organisation.

The extent of troubles that WTO faces can be gauged from the fact that if MC13 had "delivered" on some of the contentious issues on which decisions were expected, the problems facing the regime would have become worse. The agenda for the ministerial conference had two proposed plurilateral agreements being negotiated on new issues, namely, investment facilitation and e-commerce. These negotiations do not include the entire membership of the organisation, but subsets of members who act as "clubs of the willing". Since the Buenos Aires Ministerial Conference in 2017, several plurilateral agreements were initiated, ignoring the convention that WTO decisions can only be on the basis of consensus. In other words, new issues are included only if the entire membership is on board. Though the rules of WTO allow for voting, this option has not been used. But despite there being no consensus, negotiations for concluding plurilateral agreements were initiated merely based on joint statements issued by groups of countries.

These so-called "joint statement initiatives" (JSIs) are also against the rules of the Marrakesh Agreement establishing WTO: India and South Africa have made repeated submissions in this regard. On the other hand, proponents of JSIs, especially the one on investment facilitation that was being pushed by China, have argued that they would bring tremendous benefits to developing countries. However, no objective assessment of these proposed

agreements has been conducted. In fact, the entire set of negotiations for concluding plurilateral agreements was conducted in a non-transparent manner. One aspect of these proposed plurilateral agreements is quite clear: They would impose significant administrative burdens on developing countries. For instance, the proposed agreement on investment facilitation would require the host countries to "improve" their regulatory standards given the interests of foreign investors. Most developing countries, and the 35 least developed country members of WTO in particular, would need additional financial resources to upgrade their institutional capacities for this. Proponents of the proposed plurilateral agreements have argued that developing countries would be provided additional financial assistance, including through WTO's Aid-for-Trade initiative. However, what they do not consider is that a large number of low-income countries are reeling under debt, and are in no position to increase their liabilities. Yet, the proponents showed undue haste for adopting these agreements.

In Abu Dhabi, ministers were subjected to considerable pressure to endorse these agreements. On the concluding day, India had to intervene yet again to emphasise the illegality of adopting the plurilateral agreement on investment facilitation. The gavel coming down for the ministerial without a single reference to the plurilateral agreements implies that the spirit of trade multilateralism has survived, at least for now. That the plurilateral agreements were not adopted in Abu Dhabi, shows in good measure the influence that countries such as India and South Africa can have on WTO processes, and this augurs well for the future of multilateralism. However, India would be deeply disappointed that no decision was taken on public stockholding of food grains not being considered a violation of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), a key demand for the country since this is at the heart of its public distribution system (PDS). In fact, the 13th Ministerial Conference ended without the Ministerial Declaration taking note of this critical issue and reiterating that a permanent solution would be found in a time-bound manner to address the problems that the government could face in implementing its recent decision to provide free food to 810 million people until 2028.

The subsidies discipline under the AoA has a fallacious methodology for calculating the level of government support to agriculture, as per which India's budgetary outlays for procuring food grains and the cost of distributing the stocked grains through the PDS exceed the AoA's subsidy threshold. In 2013, the Bali Ministerial Conference had taken a decision that India would be given a temporary waiver for food security purposes until a permanent



solution was found. The Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies was adopted in 2022 to address the critical issue of sustaining fish stocks by restricting subsidies granted to the fishing industry. Negotiations for including additional provisions in the Agreement, in which India has remained deeply engaged primarily to protect the livelihoods of traditional fishermen, are currently under progress. This space will surely be watched with interest in the post-Abu Dhabi talks.

MC13 was unable to lift the air of pes-

simism around the future of the multilateral trading system also because no decision was taken to mend WTO's broken dispute settlement mechanism (DSM). A well-functioning DSM is essential to ensure that WTO members implement their commitments fully. Unless members can fix the DSM, incentives to violate WTO rules will remain. Biswajit Dhar is distinguished professor, Council for Social Development, and retired professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University. The views expressed are personal

India's fight against rare diseases

The tragic death of 19-year-old child actress Suhani Bhatnagar from dermatomyositis, a rare disorder that causes inflammation in muscles, came in the same month as Rare Disease Day, which is marked today. The last day of February every year is consecrated to support crores of individuals who, because of their rare medical conditions, have long been neglected and stigmatised.

According to the World Health Organization, rare diseases afflict 1 or less per 1,000 population. Barely 5% of the over 7,000 known diseases worldwide are treatable. Most patients typically receive only basic treatment that alleviates symptoms. Some require exorbitantly priced antidotes and supportive medication throughout their lives, which they can't afford. Suffering and death are the fate of many who are victims of rare diseases.

India accounts for one-third of the global rare disease incidence, with over 450 identified diseases. These range from widely known ones such as Spinal Muscular Atrophy and Gaucher's disease to lesser-known ones such as Mucopolysaccharidosis type 1 and Whipple's disease. Though our country lacks a standard definition for rare diseases, a rough estimate suggests that about 8 crore-10 crore Indians suffer from one rare disease or another; over 75% are

children. Yet these diseases are largely overlooked. Resource constraints apart, India languishes near the bottom on awareness, diagnosis, and drug development for rare diseases.

After many nudges from the courts, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare formulated a national policy to treat rare diseases in 2017 but withdrew it in 2018 owing to "implementation challenges" and confusion regarding disease coverage, patient eligibility, and cost-sharing. A revised policy, the National Policy for Rare Diseases (NPRD), was announced in 2021, but problems persist. We still don't define 'rare diseases', a failure the policy attributes to a lack of sufficient data, as if regular data collection and epidemiological assessments are not the government's job.

Timely and accurate diagnosis is indispensable for the robust management of any disease, yet for rare disease patients, it takes an average of seven years for their conditions to be diagnosed (if at all). Physicians are generally unaware of how to interpret the signs and symptoms; healthcare professionals must be trained to improve their diagnostic accuracy. Expectant mothers with a history of rare diseases in their family must undergo mandatory pre-natal screening and post-natal diagnosis and care.