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CONTENTS

	PAGE		PAGE
Editorial	313	Agricultural Jottings	337
ORIGINAL ARTICLES :		Abstracts	340
1. Agricultural Propaganda	316	Correspondence	341
2. Sorghum for Popping	323	College News and Notes	342
3. Research and Propaganda Work		Weather Review	343
in Beekeeping	329	Additions to the Library	344
Research Notes	336	Departmental Notifications	348

Editorial.

Soil Conservation. Soil conservation was one of the subjects discussed by the Board of Agriculture at its meeting held at Delhi in March last year. The Board, while approving of the progress made in the provinces since their consideration of this topic in 1916, recommended that greater attention should be paid to the practical application of the knowledge already gained and that works similar to those tried in Bombay should be commenced in other provinces. We find in the note sent by the Deputy Director, Southern division, Bombay, to the Board on the experiences gained there that the Agricultural department appointed at first a graduate assistant and later on two bunding officers to design embankments and waste weirs, to advise the cultivators with regard to their location and construction and also to help them in the securing of the *takavi* loans from the District collectors. We are sorry to notice however that the beneficial effects which these officers brought about came to a stand-still when their posts were retrenched on grounds of financial stringency and when the interest on the loans was also increased to 8.3%. While even such small lines of work are being stopped as a result of retrenchment in India, we find other countries like the United States of America, Japan, Italy, Java and even the much war-disturbed China,

recognise the importance of soil erosion and the associated problems to the nation and are taking concentrated action on a wide front. An action like the one on the part of the Bombay Government would make one believe that there is perhaps not much need or scope for the adoption of preventive measures in this country. That this is not so is apparent from a few instances given below.

The silting of tanks classified in the Government accounts as first class sources of irrigation and yet unable to supply water for the prescribed period, the choking up of important and costly dams, the general rise in the beds of rivers with the loss of many of their valuable spring channels, and the conversion of fertile lands into mere sandy flats are some of the results of soil erosion. We may also add that the frequent cry now raised by the cultivator that their crop-yields have declined considerably is to a certain extent a consequence of the perpetual drain on their most valuable capital—soil—which cannot be replaced by any system of cultivation or manuring. We, therefore, consider that the recommendations of the Board of Agriculture have come none too early in the day.

In Madras, the problem of soil erosion and conservation has, until very recently, received little consideration. The more destructive and insidious sheet erosion is allowed to work havoc especially in the vast black soil regions. Owing to the general depression and the consequent increase in the debts, many of the land-owning cultivators have perforce been changed into tenants with the result that their interest in the land has abated considerably. The new land-lords, being mostly absentee owners, not only do not recognise the fact that their newly acquired assets are being undermined but also go on changing the tenants every year without paying any attention to the maintenance of soil fertility. We are afraid that unless early steps are taken to control this evil, many a field which is now cropped may have to go out of cultivation. We are inclined to believe that some of the items of improvements recommended by the agricultural department particularly the advocacy of summer ploughing of the lands stand the risk of losing their value without the concomitant problem of soil erosion being tackled simultaneously.

To us it appears, therefore, essential that no time should be lost to warn the cultivator of this silent enemy and to help him in all ways to fight it by the timely adoption of suitable preventive methods. If necessary the agricultural department may be armed in view of the importance of the problem in a number of tracts with adequate legislative measures to bring recalcitrant ryots into line with others. Even in a democratic country like the United States of America a soil conservation service was brought into existence in 1933 as a temporary measure which was made permanent by an act in 1935. This body has been empowered to conduct surveys and researches, to carry out

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preventive measures, to co-operate or enter into agreements with, or to furnish financial aid to, any agency, government or otherwise, and to purchase rights or lands if necessary for the proper functioning of the act. It is reported that as a result of establishment of this agency many thousands of acres of abandoned or about to be abandoned lands have been brought back to cultivation.

We would suggest that the subject of soil conservation may be placed in the fore-front in the agenda of work of the newly constituted district economic councils, and district agricultural associations in tracts where the problem is acute. Ways and means can be sought gradually to bring into action the results of experiences gained in other provinces as well as those obtained from the experiments that have been going on at the dry farming station, Hagari. We venture to suggest that the subject of soil conservation will be a suitable one to receive a moiety of the fifteen lacs of rupees now allotted to this province for the rural development by the Government of India. We also feel that the present moment when plenty of money is lying idle in the banks and when huge Government loans are over-subscribed in a few minutes, can be taken advantage of to float a loan at a low rate of interest to re-inforce the slender resources of the back-bone of the nation—the ryots—for purposes which are certain to return decent profits in the long run both to the creditor and the borrower. Incidentally any special works undertaken in this connection might not only go to relieve unemployment to a certain extent but also facilitate monetary expansion. Concurrently the existing rules of the land improvement act may be examined whether they can be modified to suit the measures undertaken towards soil conservation. The villagers will have to be first educated by means of posters and leaflets and convinced of the necessity of their co-operation and earnest joint action in the matter.

This problem of soil conservation will also be a fit subject for the joint action of the Engineering and Agricultural departments to start experiments for the determination of cheap and efficient methods of control suited to the various tracts. We are glad to note in this connection that some action along these lines has already been taken by the agricultural department in the Bellary district (vide an article in last November issue of our journal). We confidently hope that similar steps will be taken in other districts like North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem, Tinnevely, Guntur, Kurnool, and Nilgiris, where the problem is equally serious.