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RURAL RECONSTRUCTION—SOME SUGGESTIONS

BY

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India being predominantly an agricultural country, any attempt at rural reconstruction must aim at strengthening and developing our premier national industry namely agriculture. This paper has in the main kept in view this aspect of the rural problem and suggestions have been made to improve agriculture and with it the lot of our peasants in the country side.

Even the most casual student of Indian Economics cannot but perceive a very great shift of emphasis in national attention from the problems of the city to the conditions of the country side. The Village Industries Association of Mr. Gandhi, the Congress manifesto and the ministerial programmes in U. P., Bengal, Bombay and Madras have all laid stress on the amelioration of the conditions of the Indian peasant. Attention to the sufferings of the peasant has been called by intensive rural propaganda, by *Kisan* movements and peasant marches. It cannot be doubted that the peasant in this country has been starving for decades and yet this many-sided solicitude strikes one as rather new; but then arises the consoling thought that it is never too late to begin a good thing. Public opinion has rightly called attention to the importance of the problem which affects the destinies of the Indian agriculturists who form roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of the world's population. Relief to their sufferings, and removal of their hunger, ignorance and sickness, are not merely humanitarian actions; but they are calculated to change the economic organisation of the whole of India and even of the world. One yard of cloth more worn by the Indian peasant means prosperity to mills not merely in India but also in England and other countries. The more we think of the question the more we wonder how agriculture, which is at the root of all human activity could be neglected by the Government and leaders of opinion. Even in the most highly mechanised countries like Russia, England and America, the growing need for agricultural stability is recognised. The recent policy of the British government towards agriculture, the first 'Ten Year Plan' in Russia and some of the aspects of Roosevelt's 'New Deal,' all bear testimony to the key position occupied by agriculture in the national economy of the countries concerned.

Before the eye of this newly awakened interest how does the Indian peasant stand? Oppressed by poverty, ignorance and hunger, toiling under the heavy hand of slow moving tradition, the patient Indian peasant labours on with his primitive implements, pursuing age old methods, binding himself to the microscopic holdings which are too small for a good living but too big to be given up in the midst of

the gloom and uncertainty that surrounds him. The most optimistic of calculations puts down his income at Rs. 42/- per year. Groaning under a heavy load of debt exposed to the tender mercies of the monsoon on which he depends for water (only 16% of the agricultural land being irrigated artificially) with few credit or marketing facilities he sells almost always at unfavourable times and meets a heavy tax burden. Indian agricultural conditions do not admit of corporate organisation and little wonder then, that neglected and depressed in this way, agriculture in India does not attract the best brains of the land. A recent English writer in the *New Review* observes thus of the Indian peasant:

"He has become the slave of the soil and of custom, of the heat and of the rain, of money and money-lenders; the victim of land-laws and landlords, of a hundred agencies that have cramped his initiative, shrivelled up his individuality and isolated him in misery and despair. He has lost his grip on the land, his grit in work; he is no more the soul of the country side. The rallying cry should be not 'man back to the land,' but 'the land, back to man.'"

By a very easy and natural transition this picture leads us to the thought that such a state of things cannot continue for long and that strenuous efforts both by the people and the Government, are necessary to bring about a new order. I am very far from suggesting that absolutely no efforts have been made by Government in regard to this vital matter. For more than a decade and a half now, Government have tried to tackle the various problems connected with the life and labour of the millions in our villages. Schools have been built, wells sunk, hospitals established, co-operative societies started, agricultural demonstrations held, veterinary doctors sent out, 'sanitation attended to, temperance preached, and roads and communications improved; and yet we have the disquieting feeling that we have only touched the fringe of the problem and that perhaps we have neither directed our energies along the most beneficial channels nor expended our funds to the maximum advantage of our people. The need of the hour seems to be greater, and more sustained effort, better co-ordination and an orientation of our endeavour along well-planned lines towards a definite goal.

Let not the words 'plan' and 'programme' invoke, as they do your minds the thought of socialism. Not being a doctrinaire socialist or a fanatical believer in a proletarian state I may be pardoned if I hold that socialism is, by no means, an inseparable feature of economic planning. Socialism and planning have been keeping company for some time; but the association can be broken if it is certain that the available economic resources can be used to the maximum advantage of the greatest number without the aid of such questionable companionship. Ideas of an economic programme are also opposed on other grounds: viz. that political and economic conditions are continuously changing and that therefore no plan is of any avail. Is

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the captain, setting out on a distant voyage, deterred from laying down a course by the fear of wind and weather which might drive him astray? During the course of his long voyage he may be time and again beaten off his course; but always he keeps his objective clear and reaches port later if not sooner. Having fixed a period for his labours, the captain concentrates his efforts on his task and his infectious enthusiasm spreads to the crew and even to the passengers; so much so, the ship reaches port even before the scheduled hour. Therefore in all programmes for development the time-limit is of incalculable psychological value; it gives tone and point to the activities of the people.

Granting the value and importance of a programme for South Indian agriculture we have to consider what the aim should be of such a programme. Economic self-sufficiency may or may not be a desirable goal for all India; but there can be no question that, that cannot be the goal of agricultural production in South India. The aim of such a programme for our presidency should be the fullest possible utilisation of the natural resources of the country so as to secure efficient and economic production; the elimination of delay and wastage in distribution; the ensuring for the agriculturist and the producer as large a margin as is consistent with the interest of the consumer; and, more than all, the securing for the large mass of the people as high a standard of living as possible. Besides, we should aim at improving and extending the land under cultivation, at enhancing the variety and the value of the crops produced, at introducing a better live-stock and at strengthening the ryot by the greater spread of education and by the organisation of credit.

These are the general lines of development. But when we think of the peasant and the cultivation of land we seem to hear a cry—ever growing louder and stronger from many parts of the country side—against the heavy burden of land revenue. A demand for reduction of land revenue has been made in this as in several other provinces and the new ministries in various places have put in the front of their programme a reduction in land revenue. Few will question the necessity for reduction which has been long overdue. There have even been suggestions for abandoning resettlement operations since every resettlement in practice has meant an increase in the tax-burden. On the other hand there is grave risk to-day of haphazard schemes of reduction being indulged in, mostly due to election exigencies. A stable system of administration cannot afford to deny itself the advantage of an elastic source of revenue like land, but while preserving this advantage our land revenue system must be revised and remodelled and brought into line with modern concepts of taxation. This is a problem of incalculable importance that is confronting us to-day and it is necessary to solve it in a scientific way. An extensive survey of

agricultural holdings with a view to standardizing the levy of tax on land at a level which will make agriculture a paying concern is an imperative necessity. Side by side with the reduction in land revenue, alternative sources of revenue have also to be tapped viz. agricultural incomes above a certain minimum level. The communique of the Madras Interim Ministry refers to the appointment of a committee to consider the question of land revenue reduction. They expect this committee to finish its labours in a month. It would be well if their labours are extended and if they are enabled by the Interim Ministry or its successor to produce a report after greater deliberation more calculated to further the permanent interests of the people. Curiously enough it has now become necessary to urge caution. There is little danger of ministers forgetting this question since they will be judged later by the measure of relief they give to the large majority of the electorate.

A cry equally insistent is that against the grave burden of rural debt. The agricultural debt in this presidency is about Rs. 240 crores and if equilibrium is to be restored to our economic life, if initiative, enterprise and vigour should return to our agriculture the millstone of debt, that hangs round the neck of the peasant must, be removed. The fixing of the maximum rate of interest and the penalising of higher rates and the scaling down of debts, not by a comprehensive executive fiat but by a careful enquiry into individual cases may appear drastic, but they are by no means desperate remedies. The granting of loans to ryots under the Agricultural Loans Act has worked well in the past and the scheme may be given a wider trial in the future. Next comes debt conciliation which will also be of great benefit to the peasantry. The problem of rural debt can best be faced by co-ordination and pooling of all the sources of rural credit, the professional and non-professional money-lenders, the co-operative institutions and the Joint Stock banks. Cheap long term credit must be secured by establishing a net work of Land Mortgage banks in important centres throughout the country. No scheme for agricultural development can fail to recognise the importance of the co-operative movement. Though Madras comes third in India in the matter of co-operation much yet remains to be done. It cannot be said that the advent of this movement has arrested—let alone diminished—the spread of indebtedness of the agriculturists in this province. So an important item in the economic programme for rural development is the strengthening of the co-operative movement.

However, no programme for agricultural improvement in South India can stop with the reduction of taxes and the lightening of debts. It must include well-thought-out steps to make agriculture a paying industry by changing it from a primitive rule-of-thumb process into a scientifically organised up-to-date industry. Efforts should be made

to improve the productivity of the land by better seeds, by better implements, by a more stable water supply and by the scientific use of suitable manures. Research in plant rearing and plant diseases, study of organic manures and actual demonstration in various ways in the country side must become a very important item in agricultural organisation. Both in extensive and in intensive cultivation the problem of water-supply is of the utmost importance. Comprehensive schemes of irrigation like the Mettur project are not the only remedies for increasing the area under irrigation. Minor irrigation schemes throughout the presidency must be carefully investigated and efforts made to conserve rain water by adding to the tanks and bunds in existence and by improving and repairing them. The importance of adding to the number of irrigation wells can be easily realised from the fact that 14.7% of the cultivated land in the Presidency is irrigated by wells. Another means of improving the lot of the cultivator is by eliminating the fragmentation and sub-division of holdings. Sub-division is the distribution of the land among a number of holders due to inheritance, gift or sale, while fragmentation refers to the manner in which the lands are held. If a man's holdings lie apart from one another so that he has to pass through other men's holdings to go from one to another, then his holdings are said to be fragmented. Sub-division and fragmentation often lead to uneconomic holdings, i. e. holdings which do not leave the ryot and his family for supporting himself and his family after his expenses are met. This evil can be successfully tackled through the co-operative movement as in the Punjab.

Another line of reform is the improvement of agricultural marketing. At present the ryot has often to sell his produce at a time of low prices in order to pay the land tax or to pay the money lender. The absence of standardised weights and measures and grading of produce and the prevalence of adulteration together with the ignorance of the seller and the secret settlement of prices prevent the peasant from realising the just prices for his goods. Recent investigations of the Government of India Marketing Officer into the marketing of wheat has revealed the extent of these evils; these can be remedied by bringing into being co-operative sellers' organisations, by putting down adulteration with a stern hand and by insisting always on standardised weights and measures. Government or co-operative organisations can help much by providing a net work of licensed warehouses where goods can be stored, the vouchers for which can be given the validity of negotiable instruments. Financing companies for the marketing of goods can also be attempted. A step in this direction has been taken at Chidambaram where a Paddy Sales and Loans Society has been working for some time.

Provision of subsidiary occupations for the Indian cultivator is yet another means of improving his economic position. The handloom

industry in India has yet a future and it will, without doubt, help to provide the cultivator and his family with spare time occupation. In a country which is predominantly rural and agricultural, it is only the development of cottage industries that will restore prosperity, with the minimum of friction and dislocation in the social and economic structure of the land. A supply of cheap power will undoubtedly stimulate scattered industries. Apart from this, basket-making, cattle-rearing and dairying must also be encouraged. The importance of improving dairying in our presidency can be gauged by the fact that India consumes every year (according to reliable authority) 540 crores worth of dairy products and that the consumption *per capita* can easily be doubled. Fruit gardening and vegetable growing also seem to have a greater future before them.

A unified economic programme for the rural development of this Presidency must involve a permanent unified direction and planning. This can best be secured only by a permanent Central economic council representing expert opinion. Schemes for development must be considered and recommended by them in the first instance. Then they must be considered by the executive Government and placed before the legislatures for sanction and approval. In the interests of sound progress there should be District Economic Councils working along lines set down by the Central Council. We have both these in our presidency; but their positions should be strengthened and there should be greater recognition of their importance. It is a useful common platform for officials and non-officials to work together in constructive schemes for the amelioration of the conditions of the toiling millions. Another method of taking knowledge and progress to the doors of the peasant is the appointment of Rural Guides who will be the guide, philosopher and friend of the villagers in economic matters. The present Viceroy has rightly laid stress on the necessity for greater and closer contact between the people and the officials of Government. The most effective way of helping the peasants can be devised only by studying them and their leaders at close quarters without fighting shy of co-operating with those with whom they are not always in agreement.

When these comprehensive suggestions are placed before the hard-backed practical man very often he says, "Well and good. Your scheme is good indeed; but where is the money to come from?". It is true that the path of reform is strewn with the bones of forgotten schemes and many a goodly proposal which started with the fair wind of enthusiasm has split on the rock of finance. But the practical administrator, the experts and the officers in charge of various departments must bear in mind the old adage that you cannot measure cloth without a yard stick. Whenever new proposals are made the temptation is to turn them down for want of funds. But many a scheme

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which is derided and pooh-poohed at first, turns out in the long run to be filled with undreamt-of benefits. Wind and weather seem to be favourable now for embarking on works of development. There is a glut of cheap money in the market. The proposal, therefore, for a loan of one crore of rupees by the Government is to be welcomed. It must however be utilised on schemes permanently beneficial to the agriculturists in the presidency.

Even if only some part of these suggestions becomes accomplished, the peasant will be freed from the spell of starvation and ignorance and villages instead of stagnating and decaying will hum once again with activity. This programme will include definite provision of good roads, water supply and hospitals for men and beasts. Villages will be provided with the amenities of civilised life, with the cinema and the radio, and the village will have all the advantages of the town with none of its disadvantages. Such changes in the face of the country, a new order which makes this possible, is called for both by sound commonsense and by the compelling call of common humanity. How can one look unmoved at starvation in the midst of luxury, at naked poverty by the side of princely extravagance, at the peasant's one-roomed hut by the side of palatial mansions? The heart-rending conditions that prevail in rural India can be effaced if only legislators and ministers seriously and sincerely give their minds to the great work that awaits them and extend willing hands to feed the hungry and relieve the poor and the suffering.

THE ORGANIZATION OF RURAL RECONSTRUCTION WORK

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The ultimate aim of Rural Reconstruction work is to enhance the happiness of the masses and the chief factors which make up happiness may be said to be health, wealth, and culture, provided they are made right use of. To promote these, efforts have to be made in two directions. One is to educate the masses and develop in them a wider, freer and more intelligent out-look and create a genuine desire and effort for their own improvement. The other is to see that their efforts in various directions are encouraged and helped with advice, guidance and resources by various departments of the State, and other organizations.

Though the various departments of the State, the District Boards, Dt. Economic Councils and other quasi-official bodies have each been and can do much to help the masses to uplift themselves, yet, an independent non-official organization which commands the confidence of the people, appears essential to act as a liaison between them and