

The Present Food Crisis and its solution —more land for Food Crops

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The population of the country has been increasing at a rather rapid rate, but the food production is not keeping pace with it. Therefore the food problem has become chronic in our country. This fact has been recognized by experts, and now the problem seems to have reached a crisis, and various solutions have been put forth from time to time. Grow more food; grow more food crops; make available more land for food crops; decrease the area under non-food crops; grow more of improved and high yielding strains; apply more manure and get better harvests; treat crops for pests and diseases and put down the loss; provide more irrigation facilities and increase production. These, and various other aspects of the all important subject have been engaging the attention of all thinking men not only in this country but also elsewhere; for, the trouble of shortage of food is not peculiar to our country alone, but seems to be prevalent in many parts of the world to a greater or a lesser extent. And various schemes are being worked with more or less success, and the solution is yet to be reached. Because land under non-food crops which are more paying is not released for food crops; sufficient quantity of seed for sowing, not to speak of improved strains is not available; and the required quantity of any manure cannot be had or imported. Transportation is difficult and above all, labour which is the most important factor in production has, unfortunately, become scarce and refractory, inefficient and very costly.

So naturally, the cost of production of food crops has become expensive, and not remunerative; at any rate, not as profitable as certain other commercial crops and industries, involving the same amount of capital and labour. The odds against increased production become greater, as crop yields get smaller, particularly in places like the West Coast. Here the soils are so poor that a harvest of even 1000 lb. of paddy grain per acre is considered to be a fairly good yield. Therefore, the food problem is much more acute there than in the richer tracts elsewhere. Then the question may be naturally asked "why does the ryot cultivate his land at all, when it does not pay?" He does it for no other obvious reason than the force of habit; he has been doing it for several generations and that is his profession; and he cannot bear to see the land lying idle, if he can possibly get at least something out of it. Though he is not conscious of it, it is this altruistic principle that has saved the country in the past and will save it in the future. So in our drive for greater food

production, we have primarily to bank on this quality of our ryot. So if we can give him more land fit for cultivation and facilities as far as possible, the ryot will certainly produce more.

This aspect of providing more land does not seem to have been gone into deeply, because it is considered by many that all the land fit for cultivation has already been brought under the plough. But it may be pointed out that large extents of land can still be made cultivable, and available for greater food production particularly for rice. The main object of this paper is to indicate the methods by which additional, cultivable area can be got, particularly in the West Coast. In this connexion a consideration of the topography of the Coast is necessary. Immediately adjoining the Arabian sea is a belt of littoral sand followed by the inter-region, adjoining which is the high land leading to the forests of the Western Ghats. It is the region in between the littoral sand belt and the high lands that is inhabited by the people and is thickly populated. And the soil consists of mostly sand or red loam, and is very light and poor. The main crop is rice in the low lying lands; it is the staple food of all classes of people, rich and poor alike; millets are practically unknown. The main source of water supply is rain and there is plenty of it during the South-west monsoon, viz., 100—150 inches in about 100 days. It is interesting to note how the rice fields or wet lands were formed in the past. They were mostly made up, by removing the soil to the required depth. This is particularly so in places near the sea. Even to-day, as population increases, we find enterprising people deepening the sites adjoining their wet lands, for the purpose of growing rice. And there is plenty of such cheap land which is now lying idle and which can be converted into rice fields. The ryot is certainly anxious to have more of rice fields, but the method of conversion by deepening the soil is not now popular, simply because the cost is prohibitive—entirely by manual labour, it may be as high as Rs. 500—1000 per acre to remove the sand to a depth of 1—2 feet. In these days of mechanical efficiency, the cost can be much reduced, perhaps to about Rs. 100/- per acre by the use of tractors. And it is certainly worth while expending Rs. 100/- to get an acre of wet land. The soil removed can be piled and levelled and used for dry crops and for the coconut in particular.

On a rough estimate the area that can be thus converted into wet land in the West Coast alone may run to a few lakhs.

In some places, people have already spread out too close to the sea, and now they have to turn east-wards and think of the rich high lands bordering the forests of the Ghats. Here there are very large extents of rich laterite soils, fit for cultivation and lying just within a few miles off

most west coast towns. These rich tracts are remaining un-exploited primarily for want of communications. Malaria is not a serious problem in many places. Already a number of enterprising families from Travancore have occupied a few thousand acres near about Taliparamba and Nileshtar and are reporting to be doing quite well with their new lands. Sooner or later the West Coast ryot has got to move east-wards towards the Ghats and the sooner he is helped to do it the better for him and for others. In the first place this can be achieved by opening a few good roads connecting towns.

The task of converting sandy waste lands into wet lands and establishing communications with interior parts cannot be done by individual enterprise alone. It is the work of a big organization and the working details are best left to an expert committee. The money spent on this drive for new cultivable land is well spent, for it goes to strengthen the permanent assets of the country and therefore of the people.

