

Grow more Food Campaign — Causes of Limited Success

By

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For over a quarter of century now, Madras has been a deficit province in respect of her requirements of rice. The demand has increased faster than production, due to the natural increase of population and the substitution of rice in place of millets in the diet of the lower middle class and even the working classes in urban and industrial areas. The shortage was not felt as long as Burma was ready to send us rice at a price cheaper than our own cost of production. The flow of imports was suddenly stopped by the conditions of war; the havoc wrought was so great not only in Burma, but in Siam and Indo-China, next largest exporters of rice, that the surplus available is still too short to meet the demand of all Asiatic countries—India, China, Japan, Ceylon, etc. Here was a challenge to our Agricultural Department to raise production to the level of our requirements, which formed only 20 per cent above our production, while the Department claimed to produce on its farms more than double the average yield of the province and nearly as much as the high yield of China and Japan. In the United Kingdom, food production was accelerated in the course of a few years of war by 30 or 40 per cent above the normal. Why could five years of strenuous and expensive propaganda and State-aid not raise the total yield by more than a few lakhs of tons?

Before examining the causes of this failure, let us enter a caveat against comparisons with the United Kingdom, China and Japan. The United Kingdom had a lot of reserve land in her pastures and wastelands devoted to sport, which were fairly fertile but not worthwhile cultivating as long as imports of grains and other food-stuffs were flowing in freely from America and other countries, whose cost of production was lower. Much of this reserve land was ploughed up during the war and cultivated with the grim determination of the united nation to produce more and win the war at any cost. Animal husbandry suffered a decline; but more grains and vegetables were produced to enable the people to survive with home production and such imports as could be got. We have no such reserve land in our country fit to be ploughed up straightaway. Most of our wastes are infertile, or fertile land is found in highly malaria-ridden Wyanad or Araku Valley, whose reclamation can be only part of a long-time programme.

China and Japan produce, no doubt, a higher output of paddy per acre, not always per man-worker. On account of more favourable conditions of soil and climate, utilisation of every scrap of manure including night soil and (in Japan) abundant use of chemical fertilisers.

There are tracts in Tamilnad, where we can claim similar yields, e. g., in the Cauvery Valley of the Trichy District, or the Tambraparani Valley of Tinnevely. But the average is brought down by the unirrigated paddy of Malabar, Nilgiris, etc. Our double-crop wetlands and garden lands with facilities for irrigation from canal or well, produce more food grains and pulses per acre than perhaps the land of any other country, where only one crop can be raised—though considering the labour expended, our yield per *worker* may not stand comparison.

Let us briefly examine the causes of the limited success of the steps taken to grow more food by the Government, and through the Agricultural Department in particular. The inference is that the Department is not much to blame for the failure, that there are fundamental economic and social causes underlying the limited success.

Data on the possibilities of the extension of cultivation are scanty. Reclamation of cultivable wastes, known to be fertile, would be out of the question, economically if not physically, if machinery were not available—the tractor with bull-dozer, deep ploughs, harrows, etc. Hence the priority for such machinery in reclamation given even by the Government, which, in general, would not favour labour-saving machinery. But so far only about 40 tractors have been obtained, several of them without accessory implements, like ploughs and harrows. Only a few hundred acres have been reclaimed, though a few thousand acres of old land have also been tractor-ploughed. The Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East has at its last session resolved to institute a detailed enquiry into the extent of need for such agricultural requisites and the possibility of producing them locally or importing them. India is not likely to benefit much except in the long run as under the Marshall Plan the needs of Europe will be attended to first by the foreign manufacturers of heavy machinery. Lighter implements of improved type, advocated by the Agricultural Department not only for cultivation but for processing are not available for want of the required steel. It has become difficult to get enough iron and steel to make or even keep in repair indigenous implements. Last year about 40,000 tons were required, only 30,000 tons were allotted; but actually 15,000 tons alone were received! The unseemly scramble for this much of raw material, distributed through the Agricultural Department, has brought not a little disrepute to the Department.

The ryots are anxious, wherever electricity is available nearby to instal electric pumping in place of the costly bullock-lift for irrigation from wells. The Provincial Government is willing to oblige but finds it impossible to do so on account of want of accessory materials.

The ryots require any quantity of oil-cakes; but the supply is woefully short—even of groundnut oil-cake, in which a black market, blacker than in rice, has developed. Two and half lakhs of tons have been supplied through the agency of the Department for over 10 million acres of paddy land.

Chemical fertilisers are available to some extent, but it is not safe to use them in our tropical climate except with green leaf manure. Strenuous propaganda for an year to grow glyricidia has unfortunately failed, partly on account of the failure of monsoon. Propaganda for the use of night-soil composted has made little head-way, due to strong social prejudice against it—unlike in China and Japan.

Seeds of certain improved strains of paddy have been quite popular in certain districts, but the arrangements for their multiplication and supply to ryots are inadequate. Our Demonstrators are saddled with so many duties—particularly trade in implements and iron and manures. They have no time to attend to the regular work of propaganda and demonstration. Ryots too are hesitant to get better seeds from Taluq depots on condition that they should deliver the produce at a premium which is a poor bait in these days of soaring prices in the black or free market.

A common cause of the failure to take up any improvement, especially of an enduring character, is the system of tenancy—at-will—whether on fixed or on share lease—in vogue in paddy growing areas. The landholders seldom cultivate the land themselves but lease out to petty tenants, who are not sure of the renewal of the lease at the same rent, especially after an improvement in yield. Share lease in particular, is a poor inducement to improvement, especially where the full benefit is not reaped in the same crop. Hence the disinclination to grow trees or plants for green manure, to raise bunds for conservation of rainfall or dig drains to get rid of excess moisture.

Another serious limitation to putting in extra effort to grow more is the strained relationship between the agricultural labourer and the landlord in the last 4 or 5 years—synchronising with the Grow-More-Food Campaign. The situation is at its worst in some of the principal paddy growing areas where a system of semi-servile labour was in vogue for a long time. Added to the vagaries of the monsoons are the whims and fancies of labourers and landlords who indulge in strikes and lock-outs, neglecting sowing and reaping in the proper season.

The market too for produce is not free. Procurement by Government was felt to be harrassing at the price at which it had to be sold, considering the enhanced cost of cultivation, though the surplus was

sold by substantial ryots at exorbitant prices, especially in deficit areas to needy consumers. Decontrol has begun; but it is partial. There is still the inter-district ban, which prevents the producer in surplus districts from getting what he thinks is his due. The price he gets is lower than what prevails in consuming centres, and what the Government is obliged to pay for imported rice.

The failure of the Government to control prices, when the shortage of rice is not after all very great, is not a little responsible for the cold, if not hostile attitude of the public to the Agricultural Department, which has not been able to step up production anywhere near the extent necessary to dispense with imports from outside.

