

Proceedings of the Agricultural Economics Conference
at Hyderabad, December 1948

(Discussion on "Grow More Food" Problem)

Sir S. V. Ramamurthi, in his Presidential address at the 9th Agricultural Economic Conference held at Hyderabad in December last, dealt in the main with the problem of food for India. He had made a close study of it as an administrator and as a member of the Indian Famine Commission. He said: For over twentyfive years now the production of cereals in India was practically stationary while population was growing at the rate of one per cent per year, who required half a million tons of rice at the rate of 1 lb. per day. We had to import more than two million tons of rice a year before the war. With the stoppage of imports from Burma and Siam, the situation worsened. These countries were not yet able to supply us the needed quantity. The separation of Pakistan meant a deficit of one million tons of wheat. India had to import cereals to the tune of Rs. 100 crores a year.

Our deficit of cereal production was only 10 per cent of consumption. The deficit could be made good according to experts by reclamation of waste land, increased supply of water through schemes of irrigation, use of improved seeds, fertilizers and insecticides, etc. But the Grow More Food Campaign offering aid and advice in these matters produced poor results. In the opinion of Sir S. V. Ramamurthi, what was needed was an 'integral effort' of the kind which was made by him in bringing under cultivation 60,000 acres of land under the Mettur Irrigation area, and supplying the same with sulphate of ammonia. He had 60,000 new wells dug in the central dry districts by offering a subsidy of a crore of rupees from the Government. What was needed was a very sympathetic administration; it was only then the advice of experts would be followed and the deficit of ten per cent would be made good.

But he said this was not enough. We want more food, better food and a higher standard of living. The vast unused lands of India should be reclaimed and cultivated. The multi-purpose river schemes should be executed to get not only more water but cheap electric power to yield "a more variegated economic life than a mainly agricultural economy". He was of the view that agriculture could safely maintain only 60 per cent of the population. The rest should be absorbed in layers of industry-cottage, small-scale and large-scale-with the learned and artistic professions at the top. He expected electricity to play a great part in such an industrial reorientation. It could be applied in small units though produced in the mass. It could serve the needs of agriculture, industry, commerce and social life.

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The last session of the Conference was devoted to the discussion of the "current topic" — "the Grow More Food Problem" in which several members participated.

Prof. V. K. R. V. Rao of the Delhi University initiated the discussion. He said the shortage of food was a world problem, as F. A. O. publications revealed. In India there was on the whole, an extension of acreage under food crops, but the yield did not increase appreciably, due to unfavourable seasons. In Bombay short staple cotton gave place to groundnut and not millets. Targets of production should be fixed only after ascertaining the level of consumption. Procurement should be done only from substantial farmers and not from those who had a large margin of unsatisfied demand. Mechanization of cultivation seemed to him to be a racket, not easy to apply on most of the holdings. Reclamation of waste land was not possible without stamping out of malaria. Co-operative farming would take time, if it came at all. Improved strains were not yet popular, in the case of millets. He wanted a mission to go out to China and Japan to find out how small holders there, were able to produce higher yields per acre and instruct farmers here on those methods. Prices of cereals should be guaranteed for a few years. Good farmers should be awarded prizes.

Sir S. V. Ramamurthi pointed out that these methods would not solve the problem of more food, which was urgently wanted. He suggested a change over in diet; production and consumption of tubers, potatoes and sweet potatoes to supplement cereals.

Dr. B. Natarajan, Economic Adviser to the Government of Madras, said that the problem of deficit, though longstanding grew acute only in the last four years. The production of 1938—43 which was 7.3 million tons of grains, was enough to feed the present population at 16 oz. per diem per adult. Experts held that the use of improved seeds would raise production by 10 per cent and the application of manures by another 8 per cent. But little progress has been achieved—partly due to bad seasons. There has been, on the other hand a great shrinkage in area under millets—from 13 million to 11 million acres. Groundnut has in most cases taken the place of millets. The area under food crops should be increased; at any rate it should not be cut down. Prices of food crops should not be too low compared with those of commercial crops. Some parity should be established between the two. There were 20,000 old tanks which could be renovated at a cost of Rs. 8 crores (less than one year's land-revenue of the Province), which could be spread over a few years, and the work entrusted to village panchayats who should give preference in employment to the scheduled classes and the unemployed.

Prof. J. J. Anjaria (Bombay) said that guaranteeing prices would not bring in more food; as already prices were very high. Nothing short

of an agricultural revolution in the system of land-holding was likely to produce appreciable results. Prof. K. T. Merchant (Bombay) said that more food was wanted not only now but progressively in the future as population was growing. There must be an austerity drive. "Conspicuous consumption" of all kinds, especially on social occasions, should be cut down.

Dr. J. S. Patel (Bihar) was of the view that the Grow More Food Campaign was not such a failure as made out. There was no correct estimate of production nor of consumption on the farm. The campaign to grow more food should not be relaxed; if it were, there would be a cry for its revival as in the case of food rationing.

Dr. S. V. Dakshinamurthy (Malaria Research Institute, Delhi) said that control of malaria in parts of Orissa, Bihar, Central Provinces and Hyderabad, inhabited largely by a sparse population of aborigines, would help increase of rice production to the tune of 3 million tons of rice on about 10 million acres of land.

Prof. R. V. Rao (Hyderabad) claimed that hand pounding of rice would yield 10 percent more of rice, which was more nutritious.

Mr. L. C. Sircar (West Bengal) said that a change in diet was a long range proposition. Even if tubers were so desirable, not all lands were suitable for growing tubers; and they were more perishable than cereals.

Mr. Mallinath (Mysore) said that the Agricultural Department should not be blamed. The Revenue Department gave lands to people who wanted property and were not interested in growing more food crops. The growing of summer ragi was a success in Mysore, due to effective demonstration and award of prizes to growers.

Mr. D. V. G. Krishnamurthy (Hyderabad) said that in spite of special steps taken by the State, the increased yield of cereals was only 40,000 tons on account of unfavourable seasons and the low ceiling prices. The area under groundnut which had doubled was brought down after 1947 by the imposition of heavy penalty on growing the crop in excess of the limits prescribed under the Cash Crop Restriction Regulation. The area under short staple cotton was brought down drastically, but in its place groundnut and linseed were grown. Area under sugarcane increased uninterruptedly on account of high prices offered. The Grow More Food Campaign and the Price Control and Procurement policies seemed to work at cross purposes. Liberal subsidies should be given to food growers of the State in preference to paying high prices for imported grains.

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Mr. S. K. Bedekar (Bombay) spoke of the steps taken in Bombay to compel the cultivator to put a minimum of his holding under food crops and prevent him from growing more than a proportion of his holding under commercial crops. This was felt as a grievance. The cultivator was now content to grow just enough of food crops for his family and not more for an unremunerative price. Why produce more and deliver so much of it at low prices?—he argued. It was difficult to change his psychology.

Sir S. V. Ramamurthi, in his concluding remarks, observed that it was not so difficult to effect a change in the psychology of cultivators as to bring about a change in economic conditions.

We are indebted to Sri K. C. Ramakrishnan, M. A., for the above account of the conference. Ed. M. A. J.



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