

Romance of the Reborn Sugar Industry in India

By

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[A summary of the popular lecture which was delivered at Walchandnagar, (District Poona) on 10th February, 1949 at 6.30 p. m., during the occasion of the Eleventh Meeting of the Indian Central Sugarcane Committee]

Though it is widely known that the Benares Hindu University owes its origin to our revered leader, Pandit Madan Mohan Malvyaji, it is within the knowledge of only a few that the rebirth of the Indian Sugar Industry was also initiated by Panditji. It was he that drew the attention of the Government of India to the deteriorating position of the home industry caused by imports of cheap white sugar from Java. At the instance of the legislature, the Central Agricultural Board initiated work in two directions. One was on the manufacturing side and consisted of trying to evolve a unit in between the modern sugar factory and gur manufacturing methods. To the Station at Coimbatore was entrusted the task of producing improved sugarcanes for the country. This is because the canes in cultivation over the bulk of India were easily some of the poorest in the world.

In view of the fact that canes imported from other countries were mostly failures, the station at Coimbatore attempted to produce new canes within the country by suitable breeding. At that time the opinion was strongly held both in India and outside that sugarcanes did not produce fertile seeds under Indian conditions. The first possibly sugarcane seedlings that germinated were too carefully grown and under such artificial conditions that most of them died out. An attempt was therefore made to germinate the seeds in the open and under natural conditions exposed to both the sun and rain of India. This resulted in quite a large number of germinations which gave the suspicion that they were all only grasses and not real sugarcane seedlings. The order was therefore given that they should be destroyed to prevent discredit to the attempt. Fortunately, however, a holiday intervened between the order and its execution. This enabled a reconsideration of the matter and it was decided to keep the seedlings for a couple of months but removed from public view. If ordinary grasses they would show themselves up by the time. The wells in Coimbatore are very deep and the seedlings found a lodging in the berm of these wells hidden from public view. These plants which later proved to be genuine sugarcane seedlings were thus born and grew under some form of imprisonment. This reminds one of the manner in which great men were ushered into this world. Lord Jesus was born in a manger and Lord Krishna in prison.

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When the Indian Sugar Committee of 1920 visited our then chief source of white sugar namely, Java, both information and plant material were freely given to India as it was thought at the time that India could never count in the white sugar world. It was then more than half a dozen years since the Coimbatore station was started on a temporary basis and so its productions were beginning to show some promise in the experimental plots of certain provincial stations. Even so, the Committee which contained men of knowledge and experience made bold to recommend the continuance of the Coimbatore attempt.

The productions from Coimbatore had many vicissitudes during their infancy and childhood stages. Being on a temporary basis the retrenchment committee constituted at the time by Government to effect economies naturally paid its first attention to Coimbatore. Fortunately however, the canes from Coimbatore — though yet grown only in small plots — had attracted the attention of a group of sugar factories in Northern India and under European management. This was because of the enthusiasm of the Sugar Bureau under Mr. Wynne Sayer who was able to get grants from the factories for expanding this work. As hard headed businessmen had placed belief in the possibilities of the Coimbatore attempt it was easy for the Government of India to continue the station though for short period and on temporary basis.

At that time certain of the Scientists at Pusa developed a hostile attitude to the Coimbatore productions. The now famous Sir Albert Howard opined that the flowering of the Coimbatore canes showed weakness. He also mentioned that the higher yields would quickly impoverish our soils. Mr. G. Clarke who was in charge of the most important sugarcane station in the U. P. pinned his faith in the Java canes which he had imported and was pushing into the cane belt. He felt that Coimbatore could not come up to the level of the Java work and therefore practically banned the cultivation of Coimbatore cane near his station. Perhaps, the first favourable report of Coimbatore work came from distant Cuba who found Co. 281 a useful cane. The factory at Nellikuppam in South India came to know of this and obtained planting material of this cane from Coimbatore.

Apart from the above there existed a popular prejudice against these productions because they were new. Some North Indian cultivators thought that because of their flowering the Coimbatore canes would ultimately develop weakness. It was even believed at the time that *gur* from Coimbatore canes would cause impotency.

Amidst these gloomy environments credit is due to the first Tariff Board which definitely realised that there was some possibility in India to develop a strong home industry. It has to be remembered that at that time, the Coimbatore productions were practically confined to experimental

plots in Government farms. The Coimbatore canes soon spread into cultivation and easily established their superiority in the grower's fields. Planting material of certain of these canes were even stolen from experimental stations and one such cane—rejected by the Experiment Station at the time—served the industry in a remarkable way for some time. This shows that when an improvement is real it does not take much labour to put it across to the Indian Cultivator. The Deitz Lanterns now so popular in India won their way through sheer superiority.

The Coimbatore productions soon came to be known in the other sugarcane stations of the world and indents began to pour in from other sugar stations on the basis of exchange of material. To-day, the Coimbatore productions have shown their use in many parts of the world from Cuba and Peru in the West to Australia in the East. In fact, the Coimbatore work came to be known in the other parts of the world earlier than most other achievements of the Agricultural departments in the country.

If one were to examine the basic factors on which the Coimbatore work was built up these may be summarised in three words:—**SINCERETY, BOLDNESS and HIGH ENDEAVOUR.** From the very commencement the persons in charge of Coimbatore work concentrated their sole attention on only one object namely, the production of improved canes for India. Secondary issues of however great scientific interests were religiously eschewed to conserve the energies of the station for the main work set before it. This aspect is very important for real advance in research with a definite aim. Unfortunately, this is not always realised in the country. Again, the Coimbatore scientists pursued in their endeavour new and bold lines in their scheme of hybridization. The programmes followed were frowned upon by orthodox text book scientists. Today the Coimbatore sugarcane station has got a range of parent material comparable to and in some cases superior to the other sugarcane stations of the world. For success in the future the station needs a personnel with high enthusiasm and boldness to follow up the new and novel lines of hybridization laid down during the past three decades of its existence and freedom to carry on its work unhampered by official red tape and all it connotes. **JAI HIND.**

