

The Food Problem in Madras

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The problem of food is becoming a crisis day by day, engaging the best brains and the greatest men of the country. This inadequacy started in 1942-43 in the midst of war, due to sudden influx of evacuees from Burma and other States coupled with increased numbers of Military to be fed. In spite of all efforts by the State for increased production, by various concessions such as manures, seeds, mechanical and electrical power and land with irrigation projects and improvements for increased water supply, this deficit is still not made up. The reasons quoted are the failure of crops by excess or shortage of rains, and adverse seasonal effects, but there should also be some underlying root-cause that contributes to this crisis.

1. That the season and weather conditions alone are not the real causes, can be substantiated by the following examples :

(A) In September - October, 1949 there was cyclone and storm in North Circars which devastated the paddy crop to the maximum extent. Yet the prices of rice, or in other words the extent of dearth of food was not so high as what prevailed in October 1950 or March 1951, in Vizag district especially.

(B) Even the drought-affected parts of the province (Chingleput, N. Arcot) and the famine declared state of Cooch Bihar have not felt the soaring up of prices so much as the Andhra districts in March 1951, where the crops (paddy etc.,) harvested were not below normal in many parts. So it is apparent that seasonal effects alone are not responsible for the sudden crisis or inadequacy of food, but there is something else. It is not due to real want of food grains in the locality but want of adequate release and liberal distribution. The reasons for this lock-up or hoarding are as follows :

(i) From the beginning the ryot is unwilling to part with his grain to the State, in spite of rigorous procurement, due to discontent with the controlled price of Rs. 18-6-0 per bag. In 99% of the villages that discontent is not entirely unreasonable. Thus the real agent that produces food is neither friendly to the procuring authorities nor does he think of parting with his produce for procurement. Thus leaving aside the unwilling or antagonistic real agent i.e., the ryot, other means like regulations, rules, etc., cannot alter the situation.

(ii) Secondly, the ryot devotes more attention to his commercial crops such as sugarcane, plantains, vegetables, turmeric, onions, chillies etc., on wet lands, cotton groundnut, Deccan Hemp for fibre, etc., on dry lands than food grains, as these fetch much higher prices in the market. For instance (a) from 1 acre wetland if cropped with sugarcane a ryot gets Rs. 2000 - Rs. 800 = Rs. 1200 net profit in the place of Rs. 270-40 plus Rs. 100 = Rs. 330 net per acre of paddy, with *pyru* ragi following.

(b) A ryot growing plantains would realise Rs. 800/- net profit, instead of Rs. 330/- by growing paddy.

(c) A ryot with summer brinjal crop or turmeric would get Rs. 400/- net, in 4½ months, instead of Rs. 220/- on second crop paddy.

(d) A ryot who grows onions or vegetables after paddy harvest (between January and April) would realise Rs. 280/- net profit while his neighbour cropping with *pyru* ragi in the same period would get only Rs. 160/- net profit.

(e) *Dry lands*: He who grows Deccan Hemp for fibre is realising Rs. 400—80=Rs. 320/- net while his neighbour growing ragi gets only Rs. 150/- net. He who grows groundnut on one acre gets Rs. 290/- net while his neighbour growing ragi gets only Rs. 150/-. He who grows 1 acre cotton on dry land gets Rs. 300/- net in place of Rs. 100/- by cholam. These disparities induce the ryots to go in for commercial crops in preference to food grain crops.

(iii) Thirdly the non-restriction of area under commercial crops leaves the cultivator free to increase the areas under these, to get increased profits. In fact he wants to minimise the area under food crops wherever possible to avoid procurement, with an area to just suffice for his consumption and that of his servants.

(iv) Fourthly, where subsidiary crops can be raised he prefers to grow money crops, rather than food grain crops, to avoid controls.

(v) He resents the control system of grain and its purchases as it is at variance with other controlled agricultural products. For instance, when his paddy price is fixed at Rs. 17—13—0 per bag i.e. at 3¾ times the prices of 1936—37, his sugarcane product (jaggery) is fixed at Rs. 0—11—0 per vis or in other words 8 to 10 times the price in 1936. Similarly when his *ragi* and *cumbu*, prices are fixed now at Rs. 16—8—0 per bag i. e. 4 times the price of 1936, the groundnut product i. e.—cake is fixed at Rs. 14—4—0 per bag, i. e.—14 times the price of 1936 and oil at six times the pre-war prices.

(vi) The ryot's displeasure is not confined to the preference of commercial crops in place of food crops in old lands but the same mentality is exhibited in newly reclaimed lands as well. In the name of growing food crops he takes mechanical aid (tractors, bull-dozers, pump-sets, engines etc.) but uses the land for commercial crops wherever possible.

(vii) His indifference also extends to the growing of green manure crops, where he prefers *punasa* millet crops of small duration. How to turn him into the requisite line or how best to increase food crops is a problem indeed. The incomplete release and consequential soaring up of prices can not be combated either with intensive procurement or in its entire absence as well. In both cases the situation could not be set right. When lakhs of consumers do require procurement for ration supply, others, including small tenants ardently desire the cessation of procurement. As such the problem remains as unsolved as before. A *via media* policy to satisfy both sections is necessary.

The following suggestions are offered to satisfy both :—

1. To collect all land kist and assessment in the shape of food grains as per the old system, centuries back. There is now much difficulty with regard to collection - weighing, storage, carting etc. The special village official will collect and the contractor will carry and store in town. By this system Rs. 12/- crores worth of food grains (Government and Estate lands) can be collected. The extra trouble is worth shouldering when compared with the immense trouble to approach foreign countries.

2. To levy from all lands above 3 acres one bag per acre in rain-fed lands and shallow tankfed lands (non-deltaic area), while in project areas the usual rates can be insisted on.

3. To levy $\frac{4}{5}$ ths of the dry and high level wet-lands at the usual rates specified in 1 and 2 above, irrespective of the area actually grown by the ryot with food crops. If he grows food crops in less area he will have to purchase and deliver the grain. This may restrict the area under commercial crops to a fair extent.

4. To insist on the growing of green manure compulsorily in all lands where possible, except in low lands, at least in $\frac{1}{5}$ th of the area of wetlands by compulsory levy of additional yield for these lands to force the ryot to grow green manures.

5. To levy on non-food crops extra tax, and to show a little concession to ryots growing all food crops in his holding. Some discretion of the local officers is essential and is to be used tactfully.

6. To appoint 4 or 5 leading ryots in every village to form a procurement committee who may be entrusted with the collection and delivery of the levied quantities in full. This committee may be either honorary or a small compensation paid. It is this committee of local influential men that can safely arrange the procurement, that can watch the prices, that can prevent transfer of stocks to outside, and that can unearth concealed stocks.

7. To settle the prices from firka to firka or from taluk to taluk in consultation with this committee from time to time. No hard and fast rules can be enforced for the whole district. In several localities, special circumstances would prevail where high prices would inevitably range.

8. When the rations by local vendors are issued by measurement, let the same measure be used for procurement. The ryot resents delivering by weight when his servant purchases from the ration shop by measurement.

9. To fix controlled prices for procurement at a fair level seeing the market for other agricultural produce, comparing both with 1936 prices. The vast disparity in different agricultural produces causes unwillingness to part with his grain to the State or to grow more food crops.

10. To plan from now on to remove the grain control after a time by eventually entrusting it to village committees with members commanding influence over several villages.

The Congress Panchayatdars, the District and Provincial Congress Committee members, the M. L. As. who are all expected to command influence over the public of the locality can sympathise with the hungry millions, join these committees voluntarily, exhibit self-sacrifice and help the situation. The District Collectors can persuade these elected members and other influential leaders to form committees for this purpose. They are to be made to observe strictness, impartiality and loyalty to the State.

11. To guard against the alarming news often published in newspapers (vernacular dailies) about the famine conditions, acute shortage of food and starvation in other places, etc. Similarly, publication of the black market prices of rice and millets prevailing in other localities has also to be guarded; such news causes sudden rise of prices in normal and surplus areas. The sum total of all the above is to court the ryot's friendship, gain his confidence and obtain his co-operation to deliver the goods. For this, elaborate propaganda, appeals to humanity, through papers, books, songs, ballads, cinema shows, dramas, meetings and above all, by voluntary teams of propagandists manned by influential leaders, as was done hitherto in the days of Khadi propaganda, Harijan propaganda, and for enlistment of Congress members.

2. The appeal should also be based on religious sentiments, something like saving of lives from death by moving speeches, since in our country ryots are readily influenced by religious appeals.

3. To write and publish an extra reader for V Class, a text for VIII Standard and a compulsory reader for S. S. L. C. in vernacular languages, considering this food production.

4. To prepare ballads in melodious tunes to be sung by villagers.

5. Village boys are to be taught *Dasara Padyams* or verses for *Dasara Puja* days sung in teams for 15 days in September. Composting, tree-planting, green-manuring, fertiliser application, food production, human sympathy, saving several lakhs of lives of starving people, these can be the subjects of the verses thus sung.

6. Of late *Burra Kadha* has become popular in Andhra districts and *Kathakali* in Malayalam. Items of the above type in story may be put across to rural folk in those regions.

Any amount of preaching or propaganda cannot succeed with the ryot when it is a question of his extra income or money earning, especially when the necessities and luxuries are to be purchased by him at high prices in the market, e. g., cloth, vessels, iron, implements and others.

As such, vigorous and strenuous propaganda and appeals to his sympathy in the name of God and humanity alone, can induce the ryot to unlock his underground cells and granaries.