

Self-sufficiency in Jute

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TILL last year, the policy of the Central Government had been to make an all-out effort to increase the production of jute in India, so that self-sufficiency in this valuable raw material, which feeds the mills, might be obtained within a reasonable time. The assumption, which was clearly understood, was that no attempt should be made to interfere with the cultivation of food crops, as the declared objective of the Central Government was to attain self-sufficiency in food by the year 1951. In my article on "Post-Devaluation Problems of Jute" in this Journal of the 29th October 1949, I pointed out that production of jute in India could be substantially increased by (a) increasing the jute acreage, without interfering with food crops and (b) increasing the yield per acre—by the use of chemical fertilizers and seeds of improved variety and by the adoption of improved methods of cultivation—as demonstrated by the Agricultural Research Section of the Indian Central Jute Committee.

It was suggested that acreage in jute could be substantially increased by (i) bringing cultivable waste lands in jute growing Provinces under jute cultivation and (ii) by means of *double cropping*—e.g. by growing jute as a subsidiary crop on some lands which were exclusively used for production of *aman* paddy.

These methods were expected to increase the jute crop in India from 20.3 lacs of bales in 1948-49 to about 28 lacs of bales in 1949-50,—against a total of 60 lacs of bales required annually for consumption in the mills in India. Self-sufficiency was still very far off; whatever our *pandits* in the Agriculture Department might say, it was physically not possible to work up to 60 lacs of bales within the next three or four years unless large areas of paddy land were diverted to jute cultivation, which would spell disaster to India's programme for attaining self-sufficiency in food by 1951.

The only suitable course to be followed by India and Pakistan was to enter into a trade agreement which would ensure the supply of raw jute by Pakistan to India, in exchange of iron and coal required by Pakistan.

It is unfortunate that this aspect of the problem did not receive the consideration it deserved, and by a curious change of policy, not readily understood by ordinary mortals—the Central Government authorized the diversion of large areas of paddy land to jute cultivation. In West Bengal alone, 2,00,000 acres of *aus* land were diverted to jute cultivation during the current war; while bringing in an additional yield of about 5 lacs of bales of jute (at 125 bales per acre), it is estimated to cause a loss to the state of about 64,000 tons of rice. Al-

ready the food situation in West Bengal is pretty serious, and unless substantial help is forthcoming in the form of additional allotments of rice from the Centre, it may become unmanageable.

The question which one would naturally like to ask is why was this diversion of paddy lands to jute cultivation allowed by the Centre on such a large scale in the face of the deteriorating food position in the state, further complicated by the influx of hordes of refugees from Eastern Pakistani? The main object, it is not difficult to understand, was to maintain the supply of raw jute to the mills for the production of jute goods, which earn dollars; but can it be denied that it is of greater importance to conserve the food supply within the Union, and gradually to aim at self-sufficiency in food by increasing the production of food crops? The import of food grains from hard currency areas would, again, mean a heavy drain on the dollar reserves of the country; and surely it is not wise to aim at self-sufficiency in jute at the expense of self-sufficiency in food!



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