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Misuse of Edible Oils

ON the bigger issues facing the nation today there has been a set-back all along the front during the week. The Chief Ministers of the States, who met in Delhi to consider the problem of food, official language and students' indiscipline, dispersed without taking any decisions or arriving at any conclusions. The *dictat* of a member of the Congress High Command that the Central Bureau of Investigation shall have no right to investigate on its own suspected cases of corruption involving any Minister unless a *prima facie* case has been made out to the satisfaction of the Central Parliamentary Board has not been refuted or contradicted by the Government till the time of going to press. This hits at the very basis of administration and invests the party in power with a superiority which is altogether inconsistent with the spirit of a democratic government.

As against these momentous issues, the move for augmenting ever so slightly the availability of cooking oils and fats by banning their use in soap-making is a matter of little importance. Even so, the idea behind the move is laudable and its application has considerable significance because of the attention it draws to an important aspect of economic development in the country. As a diagnostic case study, it deserves wide notice.

A non-spectacular but nevertheless important aspect of economic development is continuing improvement in the pattern of utilisation of raw materials. The process includes also bringing into commercial use materials which had remained unutilised hitherto or been utilised only very partially. For several years past, in fact ever since June 1957, the vegetable oil economy of the country has been running a deficit, and the net import of such oils has been increasing. The limited exports of vegetable oils which used to be allowed in the past had been dwindling and have been now completely stopped. Even when these exports were allowed, they were exchanged for substantial quantities of oils of other varieties—such as coconut or palm oil for exports of groundnut oil.

In a continuing situation of shortage of edible oils, it was indefensible to allow such oils to be used for industrial purposes, e g, soap-making. True enough, there is a fairly large soap industry in the country both organised and in the cottage sector and a sudden stoppage of supply of raw materials used by the industry would not be a feasible proposition. What should be done is to put gentle pressure on this industry to look for and turn to alternate sources of raw materials. Among the natural resources which largely go to waste in this country are various kinds of oil producing seeds—from forest, tress—which are not commercially exploited. Another substitute material for soap making is tallow but under the conditions in which slaughter houses are run, not much tallow of a suitable quality is commercially obtainable. There are other sources which have not been tapped or explored at all, viz, marine products such as oil from non-edible varieties of fish, sharks and whales. There is enough evidence to suggest that substantial quantities of such oils and fats, perhaps more than adequate for the soap and other industries, could be made available if the marine resources of India's 2,500 mile coastline are developed even partially.

It was a forward and most welcome step, therefore, when the first move in the direction of diverting the soap industry to non-edible oils was taken by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture some three months ago, A

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