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INDIA'S FOOD PROBLEM AND PRICE CONTROL

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INDIA'S FOOD PROBLEM AND PRICE CONTROL

The doctrine of laissez-faire has now been practically discredited and its place has now been usurped by the philosophy of economic nationalism. That era of let things alone is over and that of State interventionism in all possible spheres of economic activity has appeared. Planned economy under the direction of the Government is the much heard of thing today. According to President Roosevelt "the evidences of change in our social order are so numerous, so tragic in some of their consequences, and so surely indicative of the necessity of sanity in all our planning for the future that there can be no argument with regard to the patriotic and self-sacrificing attitude all men should take who have been given the duty of government, of legislating and of administering the business of the people". In India, too, State interference in economic matters is not less rigid than in other countries.

State interference in economic matters is not a new creation of the modern age. These measures were tried in the past even long before the dawn of history. The history of China reveals to us the ways of the Government in controlling prices and in the planning of the economic resources of the nation. All prices were controlled by the State. An elaborate system of studying costs was in vogue to fix prices. An organization was set up to purchase the goods as people could sell only to the State and to none else. No doubt, much difficulty was experienced by the State in enforcing these measures. The achievement in the words of Chen Huan Chang was "A benefit to special privileged persons and a great waste".

Ancient Rome also has some lessons for us on the point. Owing to disturbances and consequent rise in prices, a decree was issued by the State fixing the maximum price which shopkeepers were authorized to charge for food products and other necessaries of life. About 800 articles were included in this decree. The results as Mr. F. F. Abbott remarks were. "For the veriest trifles much blood was shed, and out of fear nothing was offered for sale and the scarcity grew much worse, until the death of many persons when the law was repealed for necessity."

Lessons from Spain and France also lead us to the conclusion that it is very difficult rather impossible for any State whatsoever to keep the laws of supply and demand in abeyance for ever. Possible it is to keep them successfully in abeyance for some time only. The publishing of orders, prevention of hoardings, creation of supervising bureau, wide propaganda and issuing of circulars etc., cannot supply the people with bread and other necessaries of life.

Price control by the State is feasible both during normal or peace times and abnormal or war times. Here, in this paper, we shall confine ourselves only to a discussion of the wartime price control machinery of the Government only so far as it affects foodgrains.

INDIA'S FOOD PROBLEM

There has been a rapid deterioration in the food situation since 1930. Between 1930-'40, population increased by about 15% while the total acreage under food grains has registered a decline by some four lacs of acres. and also the production of rice per acre has fallen by nearly 100 lbs. India's internal food supply has thus gradually fallen short of her normal peace-time requirements and India has gradually become a food-importing country.

The approach of war to India's borders, the consequent loss of some territories wherefrom food used to be imported and the serious difficulties of internal and external transport along with the needs of the army and the evacuees from Burma and Malaya, etc., have created a food crisis of the first magnitude in the country.

The sky-rocketting prices of essential commodities and the gloomy prospects of a famine staring people in the face have filled the public mind with very grave apprehension. Starvation of thousands has upset the economic life of the country. Disappearance of food market is becoming an increasing phenomena. People are forced to stand in long interminable queues to secure the necessaries of life for hours and even then they are not sure of getting what they want. The poor and the lower middle classes are the worse sufferers.

The resulting desperation is leading to forcible seizure of food by the hungry mob. Food riots are increasing; dacoities and murders are growing in number. The country is on the verge of utter ruin and chaos.

Government has been charged for the chaos in food situation because of its inefficient price control policy and its incompetence to handle transport effectively. Even Government officials have admitted the partial responsibility of the authorities in the creation of local scarcity of food. Transport however, has not been the only reason for this widespread food famine. There are the hoarders who organise the 'Black markets' and hoarding of stocks is another important cause of the present crisis. The government officially recognizes the prevalence of hoarding and black-markets. Reports of seizures of large stocks of commodities from wholesaler's warehouses lead us to conclude that there exists hoarding on a large scale by the big dealers.

Early in January 1943, Mr. Sarker opening the first canteen organization by the Calcutta Relief Committee said, "The food situation in our country has become truly serious and the gravity is brought home to us at every step by serious shortage and inconvenience. Queues for daily necessities have become a common feature in towns. The transport situation impedes proper regional distribution of our food supply and the prices of food stuffs have gone up so high that large masses of the middle classes and labourers are experiencing acute hardships."

An early solution of the food crisis is essential in the interest of our national defence, nay, for our very national existence especially in view of the fact that the enemy is knocking at our doors. The policy so far pursued by the government to meet the situation has not been very wise.

The government has not in all sincerity taken up the problem of hoarding. It has established no special machinery for systematically tracking down the hoarders. It has so far relied mostly on its ordinances, orders and propaganda which have proved entirely ineffective. All that the government has done in this respect is that it has resorted to occasional raids here and there, prosecuted and fined some grain dealers. The light punishments awarded to them cannot step hoarding as those dealers make huge profits by selling in black markets and they do not care a fig for the meagre penalties imposed on them. Nothing short of complete confiscation of such stocks will improve the situation. Bogus committees of popular representatives who are bribed by the big wholesalers cannot bring the hoarders to book and hoarding cannot be entirely rooted out. It is only a popular drive against hoarding that will help matters. It will compel the officials to confiscate such stocks, thereby nullifying

all attempts of the dealers to hoard. And if the government adopts a policy of progressive scaling down of food prices, profiteers will be discouraged and food will come within the easy reach of the masses.

The Government seek to find a way out by relying on a 'grow more food' campaign. Opening the meeting of the Central Food Advisory Council on August 24, 1942, Sir Jogendra Singh, member for education and land produced imposing figures to show that food production in the country could be immediately increased. He remarked: "It was anticipated that 50 lacs acres of land under short-staple cotton would now be used for raising food crops. There are about 105 lacs acres of land described as culturable waste". The plan for the materialization of the said scheme as Sir Jogendra said is: "From the fund created by the levy of an additional duty on imports of raw cotton, the government of India had made grants to 4 provinces and 3 states in respect of lands diverted from cotton to food or fodder crops". It is really curious to note that the government is tinkering with the problem of food production and is not caring at all to weigh the gravity of the situation with a sincere desire to ameliorate the distressed condition of the Indian masses. Only an insignificant number of cultivators can be financed out of the revenue from the aforesaid proposed scheme. The policy of the government should amount to a definite encouragement of the peasants, with sufficient financial assistance and a guarantee of fair return to them, and then only will the so-called much advertised 'grow more food' campaign be a success on an appreciable scale.

Even government officials have admitted that it is difficult to increase further the present acreage under cultivation or to improve the present acreage yield by using better manures as fertilisers are neither available locally nor can be imported in sufficient quantity under

the present circumstances. Intensive cultivation as well cannot be of much use in the absence of this most important ingredient of a successful agriculture.

The creation of the new Food Department under the Government of India and the centralisation in the food department a number of administrative functions hitherto spread over various Government Departments and arrangements for purchase of wheat and other grains by Government agents from the producing areas has not bettered the situation in the country in any way. Even Mr. Amery the Secretary of State for India has admitted on January 21, 1943, in the House of Commons that the food situation in India is causing considerable anxiety.....that prices are rising and food is becoming in many parts not only dear but scarce.....that at first the food problem was mainly one of distribution but it must now be accepted that there is a shortage..... (however) with care and proper distribution there should be enough to go round.....(all the more) he maintains that the distribution problem is undoubtedly difficult.

But the Government of India insists on saying that there is no cause for alarm or panic. The Central Food Advisory Council held at New Delhi on February 8 and 9, 1943 reviewed the present food situation and came to the conclusion that statistically the position was such as not to justify any alarm or panic.

These contradictions in statements give us much food for deliberation over the intentions of the Government. Once the Secretary of State for India acknowledges in very clear words that the food situation in the country is critical, and only a few days after, the Central Food Advisory council in India asserts that statistically the position was not such as to justify any alarm or panic. All that we can conclude from it is

that the Government tries to keep the people in dark about the real state of affairs in the country with regard to food.

Mr. Sarkar has pointed out that a well considered policy in reference to food production is an integral part of a successful war effort. President Roosevelt maintains 'Food is a weapon as much as munitions and it will continue to be a weapon in all efforts towards ensuring a more orderly, prosperous and peaceful world'. This has to be fully realised in India and adequate food supply to the public must be looked upon as a vital part of the country's war efforts.

The All India Kisan Sabha at its Behta session on the 'grow more food camapign' of the Government resolved :—"The Sabha wants to bring to the notice of the government, landlords, moneylenders and merchants that increasing food production cannot be achieved through mere propaganda. They must make profitable and feasible for the poverty stricken peasantry to undertake the cultivation of more food crops. With this aim in view the Sabha demands certain measures to make successful the plan for growing more food cultivable land lying fallow to be immediately handed over to the small peasantry and agricultural labourers for cultivation; no land revenue or rent should be charged on the newly cultivated lands, advance of necessary capital to cultivators to open new lands and supply of cheap credit to the peasants should be assured, there should be a scaling down of excessive rents and also moratorium on revenue and rent arrears, and on rents should be granted, guarantee should be given to the peasants that increased production will not mean increased demand from creditors, landlords or government and they should also be guaranteed of a fair price for their produce and a living wage for the agricultural laboureres." These are really very reasonable demands

and the 'grow more food' campaign can be very successful if the government takes a liberal view of things and has a will to help the people.

The aim of the Government should be to encourage the production of a few well-selected items of food required for balanced nutrition rather than allowing uncontrolled production of food at random, and the types selected should be such as to be within the easy reach of the poor masses. Even when the production of food is increased, the difficulties will not be solved unless arrangements are made to ensure an equitable distribution of food. The potentialities of a cooperative system of production, storage, transport and distribution of food should be fully explored by the Government. It should be remembered that the government in England is spending £50 millions a year to ensure this and to keep down food prices.

Moreover the fact should not be lost sight of that the fruits of the 'grow more food' campaign shall only be realised in the long run and consequently an effort should be made in the true spirit for public help to refine the price control machinery to ensure regular supplies of food to the people.

GOVERNMENT PRICE CONTROL POLICY

'We must ensure to each citizen of the necessities of life at prices he can pay'. (*Roosevelt.*)

The price control policy adopted by the Government has been half-hearted, haphazard and discriminatory. Its policy all along has been to fix prices at a level too high to enable the Indian poverty-stricken masses to get their necessaries of life in reasonable quantities. This has given rise to speculative prices and has enforced starvation upon the masses by further curtailment of their consumption.

Government officials have allowed certain privileged foreign firms to make their purchases at prices far higher than the controlled rates. Rally Brothers have been allowed this privilege. Secondly, military authorities are not penalised for making their purchases at any higher price in complete disregard of the controlled rates of the civil authorities. It is really a negation of any sincerity on the part of the Government to make price control effective. They have never, it is apparent, cared to exercise it to ensure cheap food for all and in the best interest of the people—the only justification for any price control measure. Moreover, the real trouble with the Government of India is that it has no roots in the people and having no touch with the people does not receive any cooperation from them in measures that cannot succeed in the absence of this cooperation. Their discriminating policy of controlling prices has all the more encouraged black markets, speculation and hoarding. The corruption and inefficiency of the price control department has added fuel to the fire. The Secretary of State for India has admitted in January, 1943, that the Government of India have not been able to check hoarding and profiteering. This can never be possible unless honest effort in this direction are made.

The success of any scheme of price control can only be measured by the adequacy of supply and the maintenance of quality of articles on which the control is applied. Our observations have shown that any commodity whose price is fixed by Government practically disappears from the market; and in case it is available, it is very badly adulterated. In case of sugar we have noted that merchants release it very reluctantly, and that too of third class quality, practically wet at times and even less in standard weight very often. To prevent adulteration of articles as a consequence of controlled rates, it is suggested that the

price controlling authority should grade the essential commodities and any violation should be very strictly dealt with by law.

The serious intentions of the Government of India in restricting the consumption of necessaries of life by the masses can be further appreciated by the observations made by Sir Ramaswamy Mudalier at the fourth Price Control Conference held in February '42: "The common man should be made to realise that by saving his money he would in effect be earning it rather than throwing it into a market which was already somewhat disturbed by an excess of purchasing power, then it would help a great deal. We want to dam up present purchasing power and release it at a later stage".

The situation has been further aggravated by the inflationary tendency which has set in the country owing to the currency policy of the Government and has in turn rendered the price control policy ineffective. The fact that currency note circulation has increased three times from Rs. 179 crores in August 1939 to nearly Rs. 600 crores at present has deteriorated the food position all the more. Unless this inflation problem is satisfactorily tackled much success is not likely to attend all efforts of the Government in solving our food problem. Prof. Vakil of Bombay pointed out that the Government put a crore of rupees of notes every day for the purchase of goods in the market, bringing about a rise of prices. He further stated that inflation gave a 'direct and continuous impetus' to hoarding. The success of anti-inflationary measures would depend largely on the whole-hearted public cooperation favourable conditions for which do not exist at the present stage, owing to the very wide gulf that has been created between the government and the people due to political causes. The importation of the British expert 'to advise us on matters relating to food rationing, dis-

tribution and how a similar situation was met with in Great Britain' will not do as he will be entirely unacquainted with the local conditions of the country and its varied rural and urban problems which have an important bearing on the problem of food supply. The true fact remains that public cooperation for the success of any scheme can only be obtained if the wide gulf between the government and the people can be bridged somehow.

Lack of administrative machinery has also been chiefly responsible for the ineffectiveness of price control. Price control without effective power over supply only complicates matters. This in its turn gives way to rising prices and control is shattered. Black markets develop where sellers can charge higher prices from the needy public.

Several Price Control Conferences have been convened by the Government of India but no substantial advantage has been taken from the principles laid out there for the successful prosecution of the price control measures. In the fourth and fifth conferences held in 1942, the principle was recognised that the control over distribution in coordination with transport arrangements might have to take precedence over control of prices. But nothing has been done in this connection. At the sixth conference, the Commerce member said, "It is clear that so long as the controlling authority does not control the supply of commodities and their distribution and is not in a position to sell in the market, large quantities, through recognized trade agencies, at the controlled rates, the legal maximum cannot be made effective over a large range of the market. Control over supplies and distribution are therefore essential and vital corollaries to effective price control".

It is thus as clear as crystal that the government

of India was aware of the futility of attempting at price control without effectively controlling the transport facilities for the distribution of commodities all over the country. It is also clear from the failure of the government of India to bring into effect the decisions arrived at the various conferences that it has no pious wish to help the people. China's example will make clear before us what a truly National Government can do towards an effective control of the prices of commodities essential for the masses of the country.

The Chinese Government made an effort to regulate the demand and supply of essential commodities. The production and distribution of iron and steel, cement, cotton yarn and piece goods, oil, fuel and paper have been placed under control. Besides these the sale of salt, sugar, tobacco, tea, and matches and other articles of daily use has become government monopoly.

In China, an Economic Council was formed in February, 1939 with a secretariat and eleven sections in charge of political affairs, trade co-operatives, wages, food, political affairs etc. The council planned and administered price stabilisation activities on a nationwide scale, while all government organs concerned were to be responsible in their own spheres of work. Although since May, 1942 the functions of the Economic Council have been absorbed by the National Mobilisation Council, the previous arrangement is still in force. The ministry of food is to control prices of food supplies and so have others to look after their own tasks. The joint board of the four government banks handles matters dealing with the price stabilisation fund. No such co-ordination among the different government departments has even been attempted in India.

Further, the Chinese government has created a fund of 45 crores of Chinese dollars for price stabilisation purposes, part of this fund is being used for the purchase and redistribution of essential commodities and

part is being utilised for granting loans to the producers of essential commodities. This has brought about a rational supply of daily necessities to the masses and has stabilised considerably prices of commodities by eliminating hoarding and profiteering. In India nothing has been done in this line as well. Much future lies for the success of the price control scheme here, if such a fund be created and loans given as in China, on moderate terms to cultivators and thereby give real impetus to the 'grow more food' campaign which will bring about an increase in supply.

Addressing the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce in Dec. '42, the Hon'ble Mr. Sarker remarked. "As you know, there are some problems which can be best solved only by a National Government. As such if I cannot give you all the relief and help as I could have done under a National Government I shall try my best to serve the interest and cause of our industry and commerce as lies within my powers under the present circumstances. He further continued: There were certain defects in the present day government. Countries where price control had been attempted on a large scale irrespective of the fact whether they were partially or fully successful—in no country price control has become cent per cent successful—they had their own government in those countries. Whatever Government decides is carried out, it having the sanction of public opinion behind it; we have not got such a backing behind us and that is our handicap.

It is important to remember here that the degree of success which control measures have achieved in Great Britain is largely due to the fact that there is practically a complete co-operation and identity of economic interests and political views between the Government and the governed and control is unified in the hands of one single authority.

It would be interesting to review with the help of some figures the achievements of the Government price control policy in India. The Index Number of wholesale prices between 1939 and May, 1942 for Bombay increased from 109 to 204, an increase of nearly 100%. In Bombay, there is a rise of more than 60% in the cost of living of the working class since 1939; in Ahmedabad it is more than 50% and in Sholapur it is about 40%, with a continuous and unbroken rise since 1939. (*Bombay Labour Office Figures*).

Another very remarkable feature of its price control policy has been that even the Government at times resort to profiteering through their cheap grain shop. The Bombay Government was realising till recently something like 50% profit on wholesale and about 60% profit on retail sales of jwar. They are even now making a profit of about 15% from the needy population of Bombay*. From this it is apparent that the Government have no serious plan to control prices to help the masses with necessaries of life at reasonable prices even at this grave hour of national emergency.

It would be a wise plan for the Government not to control prices of all the commodities. That will be a task too difficult to be performed by any price-controlling authority. The prices of essential commodities used by the masses should only be controlled so that inconvenience to the public may be avoided. England, France, Switzerland, Japan, U. S. A. etc., had all to tackle the question of controlling the prices of goods. In these countries national and local price control committees comprising of the representatives of the Government, the consumers and the producers were formed. Co-operative movement was largely responsible for the success of price control schemes in those

*See the *Bombay Chronicle*, September 26, 1942.

countries. Price control schemes were also accompanied by rationing—the satisfactory results were obtained because the public also tried for its success.

PROBLEM OF DISTRIBUTION AND ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF FOODGRAINS

The key to a successful prosecution of any central food policy is distribution. Unless difficulties in the way of a proper and fair distribution are overcome, all the food efforts of the Food Department and of the provincial governments might go in vain. More wagons should be spared for transporting food grains from places of abundance to places of scarcity because the problem of prices is directly correlated with that of supplies. Moreover, there should be a proper and harmonious co-ordination between the policies of the central and the provincial governments to ensure the effective working of the price control machinery. The Government of India have lifted the statutory maximum price for wheat but it is surprising that the U. P. Government is still clinging to wheat control.

Wholesale and retail co-operative stores backed by Government's honest and sincere support should be started to distribute the commodities among the public. As in foreign countries the prices at which the societies should acquire commodities must be laid down by the central and provincial price fixing committees having representations of the consuming public, the business communities, and the Government. Sales to individual middlemen should be strictly prohibited. The wholesale stores should sell to the retail stores which in their turn should transact with the public.

Another similar suggestion offered in this connection is the opening of Government grain shops and municipal grain shops. Through these shops the Government can easily have a control over the prices fixed for the various commodities. This scheme to be

successful will, however, necessitate that there is no trading direct between the grain dealers and the public; dealing will only be possible from the Government and municipal owned grain stores, lest the very idea of effective price control should be defeated. Moreover this scheme to be successful will necessitate the opening of a sufficiently large number of such shops in each locality and all profit-making motive has to be dispensed with.

Another hopeful and constructive line of suggestion which may solve the distribution problem and which will ensure a proper distribution of foodstuffs among the masses, as recently made by the Citizens Conference held in Allahabad, is that the citizens should unitedly put before the authorities their common grievances with regard to food. For this purpose, creation of food committees consisting of the representatives of the various sections of the people in the different wards and sections of the town has been recommended. These mohalla or ward food committees will ascertain local grievances, represent them to authorities, obtain adequate supplies for their respective areas and distribute the foodstuffs among all the local residents. Several such mohalla and ward food committees, with a central committee for the whole town shall ensure a proper management of supplies and distribution of food in the interests of the people. Volunteer corps may successfully be organised for effective supervision over distribution. It will also avoid the chances of corruption, favouritism and partiality that are rampant to day in the distribution of food through the A. R. P. authorities.

Another suggestion offered is the licensing of wholesale and retail dealers so that it may be possible for the controlling authorities to know how the food-grains are being distributed. The system of licensing

presupposes correct maintenance of accounts for all sale transactions and also the issuing of vouchers for them. Mostly illiterate Indian retailers cannot easily cope with this requirement. Moreover, even if they try to do it, it will be a too costly arrangement for them. Their inability to fulfil this condition will mean cancellation of their licences. As such the licensing arrangement might not go a very long way to solve our problem of price control.

THE PROBLEM OF RATIONING

The distributional difficulties which arise from price control have led to and will probably continue to lead to an ever-widening extension of the system of rationing.

Where there is a real shortage of supplies, equal distribution and rationing based on it is urgently needed. But to make rationing effective and just, it seems necessary that it must be popularly controlled. Any measure of rationing which does not care for people's wishes is bound to be looked upon with suspicion and hostility by the not highly enlightened and educated masses in India and is ultimately bound to collapse. Rationing should in no way be meant to enforce starvation.

A suggestion worth consideration has been made regarding the rationing of foodstuffs in banquets etc. to prevent wastage.

A special committee of the Calcutta Corporation has considered the problem of rationing of foodstuffs. The Committee think that all retail dealers in these areas who normally sell essential commodities should be licensed and every consumer or householder in turn should register himself with one of such retail shops. Each retailer should then be asked to estimate the approximate quantity of foodstuffs which he would

need in order to meet the demands of his registered customers. Prices should be fixed at a reasonable level and such prices should include the retailer's profit. An experiment made on these lines with the sincere co-operation of the Government and the public might succeed.

It is important to note that there are a large number of difficulties of rationing the whole population in India. The rationing of the urban and industrial areas is a more practicable proposition and it is a consolation that Provincial Government have already busied themselves in making preliminary arrangements so that they may be in a position to introduce rationing without undue delay when time for it comes. Rationing scheme has already been launched in Indore State and in the City of Etawah in U. P. Let us see how far it is successful. History has told us that any national plan of rationing rests on the willingness of the people to do with less than is needed. It is only a Government of the people that can create in the hearts of the people that willingness for sacrifice. Strict rationing is the need of the hour. A National Government is in a better position to inspire confidence in the people regarding the sincerity behind its measures of price control and rationing.

CONCLUSION: The real problems that have brought about the present crisis consist of inadequate supply, lack of transport facilities for moving grains and the absence of co-ordination and goodwill between the public and the Government. In view of the growing scarcity of foodgrains in various parts of the country it is essential that all exports of food-grains from the country should be entirely stopped. Controlled prices should be fixed at a level which would enable the commodities to move and transport facilities should be arranged for the movement of essential food

grains. Efforts should be made to import so far as practicable grains from outside countries. The 'grow more food' campaign should be intensified on the lines suggested. The campaign if successful will entirely do away with the hoarding instinct of the dealers and the consumers alike. Inflation will also be controlled *a little* with more food.

It is also as clear as day light that if control over prices of foodgrains is to be effective in the sense that Government can guarantee to the consumers a reasonable quantity of foodgrains at controlled prices, then the controlling authority must have complete command over the available supply and also over the demands of consumers. In the words of Hon'ble Sarkar, 'the purchase and control of all available supplies at the very source and the limiting of the demand of individuals in the form of rationing have been regarded as essential and vital corollaries of effective price control'.*

It is my firm conviction that the measure of any success in tackling this colossal problem of food and price control will depend very largely on the extent to which the Government and the public act in accord and with the active and sincere co-operation of each other.

*Inaugural address at the Old Boys' Economic Conference of the Punjab 'Varsity on Dec. 22, 1942.

