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THE INDIAN RICE COMMITTEE ACT

[N November 1944, Mr. J. D. Tyson, Secretary, Education, Health and Lands Department of the Government of India, introduced a Bill before the Central Assembly to provide for the creation of a fund to be expended by a Committee specially constituted for the improvement and development of the cultivation, production and marketing of rice and rice products. The fund was to be made up by the levy and collection of a cess on all rice hulled in any power mill in British India at the rate of six annas a ton. The Central Rice Committee to be constituted is to consist of 51 members of which 14 will represent rice-growers, another 14 the rice industry and trade, and 5 the consumers, the rest forming the technical officers of the Provincial and Central Departments of Agriculture. The main object of the Bill is to put rice research, development and technology on a more permanent basis than it stands at present. There cannot be any difference of opinion about rice being of great importance not only as an agricultural crop but as the principal food of a very large proportion of the population of the country. The Bill has been drawn up on almost the same lines as for cotton, jute, coconut, etc., for which such Central Committees have already been constituted.

In introducing the Bill Mr. Tyson explained how India had never been self-sufficient with regard to her rice requirements and how internal production had been supplemented by imports chiefly from Burma, to the extent of an average of about two million tons a year. The two large rice provinces, Bengal and Madras, were the ones that were utilising these

imports chiefly, and the non-availability of the imports has affected the food position here more seriously than in others. The Bengal Famine of 1943 had clearly demonstrated how less adaptable was the rice-eating population than those whose staple diet was wheat or millets, and anything that affected the quantity of rice available was apt to have repercussions much more serious and immediate than a comparable shortage in any other foodstuff. He also said that the population of the country was increasing, more particularly in the rice-consuming areas, and the necessity for the country to develop her protective foods like milk, vegetables, fruits, etc., was dependent upon releasing more area for these and this could become possible only by increasing the acre out-turn of food crops, chiefly rice. The present low acre yields in rice can be improved only as a result of intensive research in all aspects and making the results of such research available to the rice-growers. Although a certain amount of work had already been done in some provinces on their own and in others through the help of the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research much more yet remained to be done before an all-round improvement of the position can be attained. Even with regard to one of the important items of improvement, namely, the spread of the improved varieties evolved by breeding, the statistics available showed that only six per cent. of the rice area had been covered by improved varieties. The production of more food in the country was a crying need and any measure undertaken to increase the output of rice should go a long way to meet this need. Mr. Tyson also stated

that the Rice Committee of the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research where all interests were represented and the Government of India's Agricultural Policy Committee had recommended the establishment of a Commodity Committee for rice. It was only with a Statutory Committee properly constituted with a permanent source of revenue of its own, he said, could a comprehensive programme of research could be planned ahead and put on a permanent basis. The setting up of Commodity Committees was nothing new and the excellent work done by such Committees, say the one for cotton, was a sufficient justification to expect similar work to be done for rice when a Special Committee was formed.

As regards the cess itself, it was stated that only 27 per cent. of the country's rice production came to the mills and the levy of 6 annas per ton of rice amounted to less than 1 pice per maund of rice and even this infinitesimal burden affected not all the people but only those that consumed milled rice. The levy was likely to make available to the Committee a gross revenue of 24 lakhs of rupees every year and it would form a substantial sum for the Committee to start planning out its work. The proposals had previously been circulated to all Provincial Governments who had all agreed and the suggestions put forward by some of them had been incorporated in the Bill. It was mentioned that while one of the Provinces considered that the cess would not provide sufficient funds for a comprehensive work which the importance of the crop demanded, another Province, Bihar, had withdrawn its support to the Bill with a statement that rice was not a valuable commercial crop and the cost of research for its improvement should, therefore, more properly be supported by ordinary revenues. Moving for a Select Committee to examine the Bill, Mr. Tyson hoped that the Bill would go through as soon as possible and that the Committee properly constituted would start functioning before another rice season began in 1945.

The immediate reference of the Bill to a Select Committee was, however, not accepted by the Assembly, there being several amendments suggesting circulation of the Bill by various dates. In the discussion that followed the introduction of the Bill, several members raised serious objections to the Bill while certain others strongly supported it. There was practically a unanimity of opinion in the Assembly with regard to the importance of the crop and of the necessity for research in it in all aspects and the objection taken was with regard to the constitution of the Committee and the terms of the Bill. They pleaded for circulating the Bill to give time for the public and various interests concerned to have their say in the matter so that, if necessary, the Bill may be re-drafted and introduced again.

The main objection against the Bill was with regard to the method proposed for financing the Committee. It was stated that rice being a food crop and not an industrial crop like cotton, jute, coffee, etc., and involved millions of small growers, the levy, however small it may be, will add to the burden of taxation.

In support of this contention the report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture was mentioned where they had not suggested Special Committees for food crops. It was mentioned that the improvement of the rice crop should be the main concern of Provincial Governments and while some members were against the levy of any cess, others suggested that Government, to show their interest and responsibility, should contribute an amount to the Committee equal to what is collected as cess. With regard to the representation of the different interests in the Committee there was conflict of opinion; while some thought that rice trade and industry was over-represented others thought that the representation was not sufficient. The objection that was voiced unanimously by the opposition was against Government's nominating growers' representatives on the Committee although they did not put forward any suitable alternative method. It might be mentioned in this connection that in a similar Commodity Committee, namely, cotton, this has been the method followed ever since the Committee was formed and so far as we know, we have not heard that the method has not worked satisfactorily and that the growers' interests have suffered in any way on that account. The point raised by a Bengal representative that his Province does not get sufficient representation in comparison with the acreage and output of the crop in his Province is not strong for the simple reason that its contribution to the fund will be comparatively very much less than from another Province like Madras. While the production in Madras may be only half of Bengal's, nearly 62 per cent. of that production comes to mills and so become subject to the cess, whereas, only 16 per cent. of Bengal's production comes to the mills. The table below gives the average rice acreage and production during the last four years, and gives an idea of the relative importance of the different Provinces with regard to their contribution to the rice fund as proposed in the Bill.

Provinces	Rice area in acres	Rice produc- tion in tons	Quantity coming to the mills in tons	Amount of cess con- tributed in rupees
	in thousands			
Assam ..	5275	1831	366	137
Bengal ..	23614	8655	1380	518
Bihar ..	9335	2877	288	108
Bombay ..	2001	797	437	164
C. P. & Berar ..	5769	1408	422	158
Madras ..	10517	4921	1050	1144
Orissa ..	5027	1329	133	50
Punjab ..	1050	354	318	119
Sind ..	1329	448	405	152
United Provinces	7038	1783	125	47

If it is conceded that to develop rice research in a comprehensive way there should be a Central Committee formed with funds of its own, the method of obtaining the fund sug-

gested in the Bill is the least complicated and an equitable one and it is difficult to think of a better method. In the case of the Cotton Committee, the cess is collected on the bales arriving in all the mills and the contribution each cotton Province makes to the cotton fund will depend on the quantity of cotton produced by it. Although this figure should vary from Province to Province there is no special additional representation to Provinces that produce more cotton. So long as the utilization of the fund to finance schemes of research or extension put up by the Provinces to the Committee is made to depend upon the soundness and practical utility of the schemes, the contributions the Provinces individually make to the common fund need not be a factor to decide the proportion of representation. One would naturally expect that Provinces which contribute largely to the fund because of the comparatively greater importance of the crop to them would have larger number of problems to tackle for which they will seek the financial assistance from the Committee.

Mr. Tyson did no doubt try to answer most of the objections raised in his concluding remarks and to satisfy the demand that the provisions of the Bill should be more widely known to the public, agreed to have the Bill circulated up to 28th February 1945. It was clear from the speeches of Mr. Tyson as well as that of the Hon'ble member in charge of the Department who also took part in the discussions, that they would be quite willing to consider any constructive suggestions to improve the Bill. Let us only hope that the re-drafted Bill would meet with the approval of the Assembly and be passed unanimously when next it comes before it as we are sure that the formation of the Committee will go a long way to improve the present unsatisfactory position of rice in the country.

In this connection it will not be out of place to consider briefly the position of rice research in the country. The table given earlier gives an idea of the relative importance of the rice crop to the different Provinces. Taking into consideration the major rice Provinces, it was only in Madras and Bengal, we learn, that rice research formed an important item among the activities of the respective Provincial Agricultural Departments from a very long time. Even here, Madras was spending much more every year in rice research than Bengal. Among Provinces where rice is not such an important crop, it was only in Bombay and the Punjab definite independent schemes of research have been in progress. Rice research was almost a neglected subject in Provinces like Bihar and Orissa, United Provinces and C.P. and Berar in spite of the relative importance of the crop to them until the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research came into existence. What little has been done in these Provinces has been the outcome of the initiation and financial help provided by the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research during the last ten to twelve years. That an important Province like Bihar (third in its rice area and production) should have remarked that

rice was not a commercial crop is regrettable. If the past record is any indication of the interest taken in rice research in some of the Provinces, no great developments need be anticipated if the whole question was left entirely to the Provinces themselves. The present crisis in the country has more than emphasised the necessity for an all-India policy in the matter of food production and when once this necessity is recognised by the legislature there cannot possibly be any opposition coming against the formation of a Central Committee for this most important food crop.

While results of rice research already available in some Provinces are considerable, particularly with reference to breeding improved varieties, there is still considerable scope for further intensifying it for the country as a whole. Before this could be undertaken satisfactorily, a good deal of fundamental research on the genetics of the plant is essential. Similarly, research is needed on the physiology and nutrition of the rice plant. Exploration of the key regions and making use of the wild types in hybridisation work which has been so successfully done in other countries for other crops has yet to be undertaken for rice in India. All these investigations the results from which would be of immediate value to work in the Provinces will, we expect, come under the purview of the Central Committee to be formed. It has been recognised that the centre must take the lead in many matters if progress is to be rapid and the proposals to institute Central Commodity Committees is only a logical sequence of such a recognition. The Committee, when formed, will not merely be a body to co-ordinate work done in the Provinces as was mentioned by a member in the Assembly. We expect that the Committee once formed will immediately take up the question of starting a Central Research Station where the different problems of research mentioned above will be undertaken. The results of such research should be of immediate benefit to the rice-growers. Research work on technological side is bound to be of use to the milling industry. Besides, on an analogy of the Indian Central Cotton Committee, the Rice Committee, when formed, can be expected to be an authoritative body to express any opinion on various matters concerning rice for the country as a whole. There is no reason for any apprehension that the interest of the rice-grower might suffer in the post-war period as was mentioned by an opposition member in the Assembly. In the working of the Indian Central Cotton Committee, we learn that every proposal that comes before it is always considered from the point of view of the interest of the cotton-grower and we may be sure that with a greater representation of the growers in the Rice Committee, than even in the Cotton Committee, their interests could never suffer. We hope that the Rice Bill when it comes before the Assembly again will be strongly supported and passed without any further delay as we feel that those who oppose this Bill will be unconsciously doing a disservice not only to the rice-growers but to the food policy of the country as a whole.