

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Food has been a chronic problem in India and as such it is related to the economic backwardness of the country. The Colonial rule lasted for more than three centuries in the Madras Presidency, the longest, when compared to the other Provinces. A long series of disastrous famines visited the Presidency in succession, and especially in the last forty years of the British rule¹. This should have normally served as a stern warning to the powers that be, of the rapidly deteriorating food situation in the Presidency, but little attention was paid to it by the authorities.

The food problem had been a legacy from the foreign rule. The food situation had become precarious during the last decade of the British rule in India. The food situation in the country was worst hit and the authorities paid scant attention to increase food production with a view to alleviating the distress of the multitudes. At a time when the Bengal famine (1943) took a toll of more than three million lives, India was seething with political discontent. The Quit India

¹ Palme Dutt, India Today, (1940; rpt. Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1983), 151; S.C. Joseph, Food Policy and Economic Development in India, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1961), 5.

"Food is a century-old problem in India. The food problem is chronic and is casually related to the economic backwardness in India. It is a necessary consequence of the vicious circle of poverty and disease. The Indian people are sick because they are poor and ill-fed, and they become poorer because they are ill-fed and sick".

Movement and subsequent events in the country created a sense of uneasiness and resentment². The Naval Mutiny of 1945 was an ominous manifestation³. The outbreak of the Second World War and the marching of Hitler's hordes over various European countries along with the Japanese menace that threatened the gates of New Delhi and the blasting of atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were indeed world shaking events that took place in the stormy decade of the Forties⁴.

This study is to focus attention upon the problems of food administration in the Madras Presidency during the last decade of the alien rule. This study covers a period characterised by sporadic food shortages and tragic natural calamities like famine and cyclones in 1943, against the background of enemy threats at the borders and local political dissensions. No reader can fail to be impressed by the immensity and unwieldiness of the tasks of Food Administration in the vast Presidency, or by the degree of administrative success achieved in softening the impact of food shortages when in 1946, a second intense crisis arose as the result of widespread crop failure.

The Madras Presidency's vital problem during the years 1937-47 was to ensure that all its people were provided with their

² Bhisham Sahni, "Random Thoughts on Tamas", Indian Express, 15 Febraury 1988, 8, cols.4-5.

³ Bhisham Sahni, " Random Thoughts on Tamas," Indian Express 15 February 1988, 8 cols.4-5.

⁴ Palme Dutt, India Today, 580.

staple food. Their diet comprised of the various cereals, and if the supply of these could be assured, it was probable that the additional food needed would be somehow produced. The present account therefore had to be concerned mainly with the four chief cereals - Rice, Cholan, Cumbu and Ragi- one or the other of which almost the lesser cereals, of pulses, of vegetables and other protective foods have had to be dealt with more briefly. Attention had to be concerned mainly on the administrative measures of the Government of Madras as, except for few essential matters, the space and sources available had precluded detailed accounts of the difficulties and measures of the various Provincial Governments and the Government of India.

The purpose of this study is to put on record some of the constraints which the Madras Presidency faced during the last decade of the British administration, in feeding its 50 million people, and of the administrative measures to meet these crises.

This study is not intended to focus attention on a military, political, commercial, economic or social history of the Madras Presidency during the Second World War, and such subjects are referred to only in so far as they affected food administration. The military operations of the Allies and their opponents, the international problems to which these gave rise, the constraints of the Madras Presidency's transport system under an almost impossible strain, the economic and social consequences of the war, such as inflation, shortage of consumers goods, excess purchasing power in unaccustomed hands, and the like directly impinged on food supply. Similarly the

political and constitutional development, which culminated in the establishment of the two new Dominions, are not dealt with except where explanations is needed to account for administrative action. Similarly no attempt has been made to assess the future problems facing the Madras Presidency after 1947 of how the food production and food imports could be adequate for the increasing population of the Presidency. The problem of corruption in the food administration has also not been taken up for discussion as it is a complicated issue involving not only the administration but also politics and society. Some incidents and charges which were discussed by the Members of the Madras Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council are referred to in suitable places.

A study of this kind will throw light on identifying the causes for the shortage of foodgrains and constraints that were faced by the Government of Madras from 1937 to 1947. The analysis of trends and patterns of food production which is presented in this study is simple and visually verifiable through charts, maps and tables. Very sophisticated data manipulation techniques have not been applied. An effort has also been made to explain as far as possible the trends and patterns which emerged from the empirical analyses.

Sir Henry Knight tried to illustrate the complex aspects of food, agriculture and Second World War in India. His book indicates Food Administration in India from 1939 to 1947, which covers a group of studies dealing with wartime management of food and agriculture in various important countries or regions in the World. He gives an official statement on the Food Administration in India during the war

period in general and various Government measures that were adopted to tackle it⁵. He supported the remedial measures that were introduced by the British Government, while public opinion and criticism of the food policy and administrative measures are not discussed in his work. The present study makes an attempt to describe the degree of the maximum challenge that was faced by the people of the Madras Presidency.

The physical features of the Madras Presidency with specific information on the agrarian economy is described by C.W.B. Zacharias in his work. The shortage of foodgrain, quantity required for individual consumption, foodgrains movement and various promulgations of the Government of Madras that were passed to solve the food crisis are not to be found in his work⁶. But these very same factors are discussed in the present study.

Another work of importance for the present study, written by S.C. Joseph, is a critique of food controls, as administered in India during 1939-1954. This work is an economic history of the period with a two fold analysis of what the Government did and the Government should have done. It comprises both a historical account of the

⁵ Sir Henry Knight, Food Administration in India 1939-47, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952).

⁶ C.W.B. Zacharias, Madras Agriculture, (Madras: University of Madras, 1950).

various measures of supply and distribution of foodgrains undertaken by the Government during the said period and economic interpretation of the course of action which would have better fitted India's economic condition⁷. A strong and united food policy could not be enforced by the then Government at that particular historical situation, which had been incidentally been advocated by him is proved in the present study of the Madras Presidency. Along with this, the present study examines the public criticism on the food control measures through their elected representatives. The criticisms made by the contemporary journals and the newspapers have also been identified in the present study.

B.M. Bora emphasised, in his study, the Quantitative aspect of the food problem. In a deficit Presidency like Bombay, where the shortage of foodgrains had persisted almost for decades, the quantitative aspect of making a minimum quantity available supplies of foodgrains efficiently was the core of food problem⁸. The same problem occurred in the Madras Presidency. The present study investigates the efficiency of the Government of the Madras Presidency to tide over the food crisis during and after the Second World War period making similar analyses.

⁷ S.C. Joseph, Food Policy and Economic Development in India, (Bombay: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1961).

⁸ B.M. Bora, Food Administration in India - A study of an Indian State, (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1982).

The Economic Adviser of the then Government of the Madras Presidency, B. Natarajan in his Statistical analyses of food and agriculture in Madras, explains the various administrative measures to meet the food shortage and food production drives of the Madras Government. However, his study is silent on the foodgrains' lootings, profiteering, hoarding and smuggling⁹. It deals only with the administrative steps that were taken to solve the food shortage whereas this study also covers the above mentioned anti-social activities that had been omitted in the above work.

Christopher John Baker discusses the colonial trade, agriculture, labour, resources, production, the markets, towns, the state and the countryside in the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency from 1880 to 1955 in his work. He stressed that the developments of the pre-colonial period imposed many conditions and constraints on later history of Tamil Nadu. His work is to be descriptive rather than properly analytic, suggestive rather than definite¹⁰. He focusses the attention only on the Tamil districts in the Madras Presidency while the present study covers all the twenty five districts of the then Presidency including the Telugu and Malayalam regions.

⁹ B. Natarajan, Food and Agriculture, (Madras: Government of Madras, 1951).

¹⁰ Christopher John Baker, An Indian Rural Economy 1880-1955, (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1984).

This study is based on published and unpublished documents of His Majesty Stationary Office, London, Government of India and Government of Madras, Annual Reports, Gazetters, Statistical Atlas, Famine and Food Commission Reports, Legislative debates and proceedings, Executive orders of the various departments, British and Congress Government Cabinet Meeting Minutes, confidential and Private correspondence between the Government of India and the White Hall Government at London, and Government of Madras, journals in English, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam and other published literary works, which are to be found in the National Archives, New Delhi, Tamil Nadu Archives at Madras, Centre for Development Studies at Trivandrum, Madras Institute of Development Studies at Madras, Record Office in various District Collectorates, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University at Coimbatore and prominent libraries in Madras.

The study has been divided into six chapters. The influence of Geography on the Madras Presidency with special reference to foodgrains production is discussed. The physical and geographical features of the Presidency in the articles of daily consumption among the people and their production processes are also highlighted.

Food crises and famines were widespread in the pre-modern world, and they are, distressingly, not unfamiliar in our own time. Famines were quite frequent in India, but their range and intensity were determined largely by two factors; the degree of dependence on a single foodgrain, subject to shortage, and the nutritional levels achieved by the population. It will be useful to examine the best of

the literature on such events to see how the South Indian pattern may be similar or different, and to see how information gained from a study of the nineteenth century Indian food crises may contribute to a general understanding of the subject. The famine conditions that prevailed in the Madras Presidency with their historical background and the relief measures introduced by the Government to tackle the situation are described.

The course of the Second World War brought India into the full stream of international politics. The war of 1914 had been relatively remote from India, despite the use of Indian troops and resources overseas. But in 1942-44 war and invasion overran the closest neighbours of India and reached its borders. The war of 1914 had laid a heavy economic strain on India. But the Second World War brought not only far heavier economic exactions; it brought extreme inflations, economic disorganisation and famine. The war of 1914 had stimulated and sharpened political questions for India. But the Second World War brought the fundamental question of Indian independence to the forefront of Indian politics. It brought new issues and problems and conflicts into the heart of Indian Politics, and affected all political alignments¹¹. The impact of the Second World War on the food situation of the Presidency and the attitude of the British Government towards the war are explained. The food production, requirements and deficit during the war period has also been dealt with.

¹¹ Palme Dutt, India Today, 516.

After considering the nature of food production in the Presidency, we examine the Food Administration pursued by the Government of Madras during the Second World War period. It comprises an historical account of the various remedial measures of supply and distribution of foodgrains undertaken by the Government. The Madras Government's food policy was basically a short-term approach aimed at maintaining the prevalent pattern of consumption in order to meet a temporary shortage of foodgrains and to avoid mass discontent. At that time food shortage was not peculiar to India; there was a general shortage in the Presidency arising from war conditions. So measures were taken on a short-term basis, and India was no exception to the general trend of events. Accordingly, the Government measures were designed to provide cereals to the people of the prevailing level of intake. The administrative measures like Food Control, Procurement and Rationing, that were adopted to tide over the food crisis by the then Colonial and the Nationalists Government are appraised.