

FEATURE

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SRI LANKA'S FARMER: A MODEL FOR SELF-RELIANCE

by NIMAL FERNANDO

On a sunny October morning last year, peasants in the quiet village of Panduwasnuwara, in Sri Lanka's central province, witnessed the edifying sight of their Prime Minister muddying his feet in a paddy field. Clad in farmer's clothes, Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene (then PM) led some of his cabinet ministers, including the Minister of Agriculture and Lands, in ploughing part of a paddy field at a traditional ceremony to inaugurate the nation's production year and give symbolic expression to his new government's belief that agriculture is the nation's most important activity.

The President's action was symbolic in more ways than one: many centuries ago, Sri Lanka's kings had done much the same thing, and the ancestors of today's farmers made this country the granary of the East. A month later, in its first budget, the new government gave tangible expression to the priority position agriculture holds in its program by providing liberal incentives to the farming community.

In a revision of the Guaranteed Price Scheme, the price for a bushel of paddy was raised from 33 to 40 rupees (\$2.50) and a 75 percent subsidy was provided for fertilizer. Farmers were also assured loan facilities which are now channelled through the commercial banks by the Central Bank. Commercial banks have set apart 500 000 rupees to cover this year's first cultivation season.

The government's aim is to achieve food self-sufficiency within five years. To meet this deadline, it has launched what is assuredly the most ambitious project of any Sri Lankan government since independence -- the

telescoping of the Mahaveli river basin project to six years from its original 30. Under this project, the waters of the Mahaveli, Sri Lanka's longest river (261 miles), will be harnessed to irrigate 900 000 acres during the next five years, most of them in the north-eastern Dry Zone.

Aware that the tremendous expense of bringing this water to the vast rolling acres of the Dry Zone would be wasted if farmers were unable to maximize its use, the Research Division of the Department of Agriculture is now making a Soil and Water Resources inventory and carrying out rice breeding and field trials with the assistance of the United States and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), of Canada. The Agriculture Department is also helping the farmers in multicropping. The Research Division has launched a Cropping Systems Research Project under which groups of 20 to 30 farmers are selected for a study at the farm level.

Generally, paddy farming in Sri Lanka is done in three ways: on rainfed lands (600 000 acres), on land under minor irrigation tanks (450 000 acres) and land under major tanks (550 000 acres). In water-assured lands, farmers are able to cultivate three rice crops a year, or one or two of rice and a subsidiary crop.

In January this year, the government set up the Agricultural Development Authority (ADA) to co-ordinate and improve the development of all cultivated and cultivable land. Established with the consent of private land owners, the ADA will ensure, through state organizations, that agricultural inputs are available and research and extension services are brought to the doorstep of the small farmer.

The government's declared policy is to give the farmer a greater degree of service than ever before, and the small farmer, tilling his own soil, has re-emerged as the model for building a self-reliant and productive agriculture in Sri Lanka. Claiming that the Sri Lanka government regarded the farmers of this country as special people deserving a special place in society, Agriculture Minister Edward Senanayake told the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) conference in Rome, in November last year, that these new measures will assist the five million people (in a population of 14 million) who live off the land.

Following the land reform of the previous government, the minister said the ground was being prepared to bring about greater harmony between the plantation sector (where the island's traditional exports tea, rubber and coconut are grown) and the village sector. Under this scheme, the National Food Production Board, manned by agricultural experts, will use the infrastructure of the plantation sector to develop subsidiary food crops and livestock production in order to generate employment and increase food supplies.

The government's program has also been taken to the island's schools. The Agriculture Minister has ruled that all students must devote half a day per week to agricultural work on school farms and small garden plots. Facilities for cultivating crops suited to the area are provided by the Agriculture Ministry which is aided in this project by the FAO, the European Community, the World Food Program and the Save the Children Fund.

Economically, self-sufficiency in rice has become urgent. Now, even more so than the development-oriented 60s, Sri Lanka is faced with the pressing need to harness all her management skills and natural resources to meet the deadline for self-sufficiency. Today, Sri Lanka imports nearly half of its rice requirements (the staple food) and shoulders the crippling burden of food subsidies for half the population whose income levels are close to the poverty line.

Agriculture has been the capstone of the ruling United National Party's development policy since its inception. The country came closest to self-sufficiency in rice in the years 1967 to 1970, at the height of the Food Drive launched by late Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake. And encouraged by Sri Lanka's record harvest of 77.4 million bushels in 1969, agricultural experts had predicted self-sufficiency could be reached as early as 1974.

But this was not to be. A four-year drought and incompetent management in the early part of the land reform exercise combined to slow down the Food Drive.

Now, this lost impetus is being recaptured with the dynamic extension effort of the Department of Agriculture which, in addition to giving farmers new seed varieties, is also showing them how to get higher yields from old varieties. Even the weather gods have been kind this year with the monsoon breaking on schedule, giving rise to hopes of a bountiful harvest.

The Sri Lanka farmer who takes pride in meaningful work, draws his spiritual sustenance from the village temple, and lives his simple life off the land, has become a model for the country. This is the reason President Jayewardene addressed his call for building a self-reliant society primarily to the farmers who alone can help recapture, in modern terms, an ancient way of life exemplified in the double image of the tank and the temple.

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