

Problems Facing the Small Scale Producers of Black Pepper

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It is an admitted fact that pepper, the main item among the spices of Kerala had attracted foreigners from times immemorial and had even paved the way for many a political change. In 1498 A. D. Portugese Navigator, Vasco-De-Gama, sailing around the cape of Good Hope, reached Calicut to return with three ship loads of pepper. The Arabs, who were enjoying the monopoly of the Spices Trade with Malabar Coast; until then, were enraged at this and when the Portugese came a second time a naval fight between them in the Indian waters was the result.

In 1599, an increase of five shillings in the price of pepper proclaimed by the Dutch privateers who were then controlling the Spices Trade with the East, prompted the 24 merchants in the City of London to organise a trading firm-The English East India Company-which expanded and ultimately transformed into the most noteworthy British Raj.

The story goes that the Ruling Raja of Travancore got cross with his minister for having allowed to export along with pepper, few cuttings of pepper vine. The Raja feared that pepper would be cultivated in the western countries who had taken the cuttings. But the minister retorted that, along with the cuttings, he had not exported the monsoons and therefore the fears of the Raja were unfounded.

Pepper is the gift of the climatic conditions of Kerala. It was more a gift of Nature than the fruits of human labour in the days of our forefathers and even to-day, things are not much different with a vast majority of this small scale producers of Kerala. They are producing pepper in their traditional way. No honest attempts have been made by them to know the how and the why. Even to-day, many of them are ignorant of the fact that pepper is water pollinated. They simply know that if the monsoons fail, the pepper crop fails. The contributions of modern science and technology to the production side of pepper still wield very little influence on them. They still

continue to be victims to the vagaries of monsoons and to the attacks of pests and insects. The hybrid variety capable of better yield is yet to reach cultivators in a substantial scale. The institutions connected with production and Research should provide facilities to impart the results of modern research and study to the small scale producer. Even educational institutions in the state, I would venture to say should realise the important role this item of spice plays in our rural economy and natural economy and text books of schools or college in Peppr growing states should contain a lesson on Pepper and prospects of growing it.

The facts as to how and when to apply fertilisers, how to provide shades to the vines and during which season; whether the hybrid varieties are capable of better yield; what the best suited soil conditions are, when the grain is matured; how to process the grain to obtain white pepper; whether the pin heads and light pepper will fetch any price, whether irrigation will help the vines to survive the hot season, whether any processing is feasible and desirable to the taste of the ultimate consumer; are pertinent topics over which the small scale producers have to be educated.

Things are not better on the marketing side. Marketing is not yet accepted by the Small Scale producers as part of production. Even before the crop is ready for harvest, the small scale producer is in the habit of selling his crop to the village dealer who is ready to pay the entire amount of transaction, in advance. This dealer collects the crop and sell it to the dealer in the nearest town where one or two more dealings take place. When it reaches the export stage it might have passed through the hands of half a dozen professional dealers and commission agents, who enjoy the sport of playing bills and Bears at the expenses of the producer. The actual amount the producer is really receiving for his produce has to bear a reasonable and economic relation to what the ultimate consumer is paying. The figures, when

worked out will reveal that the small scale producer is exploited by the middleman. The advantages of having Association and Co-operatives on the marketing side have not yet been realised by the Small Scale producers and they really need counsel along these lines also.

We now come to the necessity of statutory bodies like the Rubber Board which can do much in stepping up production. Why not some such arrangements be aimed at and worked up in protecting and improving the production of pepper. This fact requires close examination and urgent consideration at all levels.

As the bulk of the pepper trade transacted through the Cochin Port comes from small scale holdings varying from few cents to one or two acres of and, any attempt to step up production of pepper in

Kerala should not be lose sight of the small scale producers. I may present a few questions for the consideration of the conference.

1. Survey of the small scale pepper cultivation.
2. Scope of arranging production and crop loans to the small scale pepper cultivators.
3. Block level seminar on the various aspect of the pepper cultivation.
4. Scope of arrangement for price stabilisation and assured minimum price to the small scale cultivators.
5. Scope of constituting statutory body to control the production as well as marketing of pepper.