

HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, CEYLON

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I. INTRODUCTORY.

THE Department of Agriculture, as such, dates from 1912. Till then for nearly a century the Department of the Royal Botanic Gardens functioned virtually as an agricultural department. No other specific official organization can be traced at any period of the Island's long history. To explain this curious feature in a predominantly agricultural community some historical background is essential.

Britain was the first European Power to consolidate her rule over the whole Island, which she did from 1815 onwards. The Portuguese from mid-16th up to mid-17th and the Dutch from mid-17th up to the end of the 18th century held a rather precarious sway over the Maritime Provinces, often amounting to a little more than "garrison rule". Therefore though deeply interested in commercial export of spices like cinnamon to Europe, and at times of rice to other colonial possessions, these two Powers could leave little impression on agricultural *administration*; and the direction of agricultural pursuits remained fundamentally what it was under Sinhalese kings.

The ancient Village Community and the Headmen System were the two institutions that buttressed rural agriculture (the only type that mattered) for over 2,000 years, with feudal tenure as a social nexus and stimulus to cultivation. Government action was ever on the grand scale as with the magnificent irrigation works of Parakrama Bahu (1164-1197 A.D.) but details of administration were left largely to the local institutions.

"Tanks and water courses were repaired in common and combined labour collected the harvests".

It was also a time when

"Land was not the luxury of a few but the daily occupation and livelihood of the majority".

So long as Agriculture remained "subsistence" rather than "commercial" there was naturally not the same urge towards superior variety, grade or stock. Rents, dues and taxes were an adequate stimulus to cultivation. Export trade in food-stuffs no doubt existed under Sinhalese kings but the internal

economy of the country remained one mostly of barter : there was little commercial intercourse between self-contained villages except for commodities like salt. Besides, as we see in our own day, the cultivation of paddy and the chena crop (the antiquity of which is established by pre-Sinhalese Veddah legends) required no complicated "capitalistic" organization based on a cash nexus.

Mainly under consolidated British rule, with its stimulus to coffee, tea, cocoa, coconuts and rubber, commercial agriculture began to cut through the ancient structures of society. The individual began to assert himself against hard-baked custom to join the new race for wealth. Money circulated more freely and "native" trades like the arrack business were quickly stimulated. There arose a vast social and agrarian revolution : land became aggregated in large holdings, a new agricultural rich arose, and the commercial estate came to stay. Land, in the economic sense, had become the "luxury of a few".

Very soon therefore commercial agriculture began to present its own problems in the 19th century, and in the absence of a proper Department of Agriculture the Royal Botanic Gardens at Peradeniya, (established in 1822 for a less ambitious purpose) meant far more to estate agriculture than its title would indicate, and did all the pioneer and experimental work for "economic crops". Its international reputation, fostered largely by the calibre of the research and scientific staff it was able to attract from time to time, made a separate Department of Agriculture appear almost superfluous, at least in the eyes of those interested in plantation agriculture. Indeed, published reports and other documents would indicate that but for the rising and resurgent interest in village agriculture early in the 20th century (in which Governor Blake and Mr. John Ferguson, C.M.G., played a prominent part among Europeans) the establishment of a separate department would have been much longer delayed.

1899 brought agitation to a head and a commission was appointed "to inquire into and report on the advisability of establishing a Department of Agriculture".

Various memoranda were submitted to it, most of them, curiously, eulogizing existing organizations rather than appreciating the necessity for a new department. The Government Agents also emphasized their capacity and strength to look after the peasant. Although the Commission reported in favour of a new department the project fell through and remained in abeyance for 13 years.

The explanation for the failure is understandable. The Department of the Botanic Gardens (now with subsidiary gardens at Hakgala and Heneratgoda, and several branch gardens elsewhere) had become a true epitome of a department for all forms of estate agriculture, and it seemed all the more

an unnecessary duplication if not a superfluity to have a separate department to assist and advise plantations. At the same time some of the protagonists of village agriculture became half converted to the plea of possible superfluity in their own cause when a determined case was made on behalf of the Government Agent regime that

“the cultivator could not be raised by a department but only by the influence of the right sort of man placed in quasi-parental authority”.

To the credit of both sections however the cause of a new department did not fall without substantial result. The Department of Botanic Gardens redoubled its efforts to further justify its existence, and in 1902 the establishment of the Experiment Station at Gannoruwa was followed by the appointment of a Committee of Agricultural Experiments. Similarly under the patronage of Governor Blake the Agricultural Society was formed in 1904 to promote village agriculture.

In the wake of these efforts there grew a healthy parallel development which was to outlive for many years the actual establishment of the Department in 1912 to combine the ideals of both. The Botanic Gardens threw offshoots in the way of Entomologists, Chemists, and Mycologists (later to be absorbed in the new Department) and, preserving its original and essential features, exists to this day with the same international reputation. The Agricultural Society with a Board of Agriculture of its own as executive set up an admirable framework for village agriculture with field instructors as the backbone for Livestock, Education, Paddy Cultivation, Exhibitions, Apiculture and Sericulture. This provided the nucleus for the promotion of peasant agriculture in later days, and if this Society itself “withered away” by about 1924 it was solely because its active supporters were becoming enthusiastic non-official members on a reconstituted Board of Agriculture set up to assist the new Department in 1921.

Thus it happened that whereas the Survey Department dated from 1800, the Forest Department from 1883, and Veterinary from about 1900, the most predominant single interest of the Island contrived to be guided till 1912 by organizations, none of which in its own right could claim the exclusive title of a Department *for* Agriculture.