

REVIEWS.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURE IN INDIA.*

IN April, 1926; a Royal Commission with Lord Linlithgow as Chairman was appointed to enquire into the condition of agriculture in India. The members of the Commission were men of such wide and deep experience of Indian agriculture and rural economy that their report was certain to be of the utmost value. The report* which was presented to Parliament in June 1928 has not disappointed expectations. The report (with the abridged report) is contained in a volume of over 750 pages and in the course of its preparation 783 replies to a questionnaire were received and 395 witnesses were orally examined in India and Great Britain. The evidence is contained in ten volumes totalling over 7,500 pages. The magnitude of the task of reporting on the condition of agriculture in India is obvious; these figures give some idea of the thoroughness with which the Commission set about its work.

Except for a brief account of the organization of agricultural research in Canada, Australia and the United States the report deals entirely, as is to be expected, with Indian conditions, but nevertheless it is of interest to all tropical countries where there is peasant farming and it is of particular interest to Ceylon. It is impossible here to discuss the report in anything like the detail it deserves, or even to indicate its scope, which is of the widest; attention, however, must be drawn to its excellence and to the applicability of many of its recommendations and conclusions to Ceylon village agriculture. By the many who are interested in this part of Ceylon agriculture the report will be welcomed and closely studied.

Conditions in India vary widely and are not always comparable with those in Ceylon but in the main the problems confronting village agriculture in the two countries are surprisingly alike. There are, for example, the same general problems of crop improvement, of the introduction of new methods and implements, of improvement of live stock, of indebtedness and credit facilities, and of the improvement of the health and education of the rural population.

Chapter IV of the report which deals with agricultural improvement deserves careful attention. After detailing the crops of India and their acreages and discussing the soil types met with the chapter proceeds to treat with the problem of improving the fertility of the soil by manuring. The problem needs much more investigation and "requires to be studied in three aspects, in relation, in the first instance, to the crops which are dependent solely on rainfall, in the second, to crops which are grown on irrigated land, and, lastly, to the planters' crops and intensive cultivation such as that of sugarcane and garden crops". The importance of the problem of manuring crops which depend upon a precarious rainfall is fully appreciated and it is stated that "we wish especially to emphasise the importance of manurial experiments on unirrigated land as the cultivator of such land, who runs, with his very limited financial resources, the risk of losing his crop in an unfavourable season, stands most in need of guidance in this matter". The Commission draws attention to the importance of preserving farmyard manure but realises that nothing can be done

* Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India. H.M. Stationery Office, London, 1928. 11s. net.

unless an alternative fuel supply is available. In Ceylon generally there is nothing but the apathy or ignorance of the cultivator which stands in the way of conserving farmyard manure.

The question of the local manufacture of crushed bones and bone meal has lately been raised in the Batticaloa district where, if manuring paddy with steamed bone meal can be shown to be profitable, there is a large area under this crop which can be benefitted. In a discussion of the local production of bone meal by small mills in localities where sufficient supplies of bones are available it is stated that "a far more thorough investigation of the economics of the bone-crushing industry than has yet been carried out is, we consider, required before the establishment of such mills can safely be undertaken by private enterprise. The first essential is to obtain definite data in regard to the price at which, and the crops for which, the use of bone meal is advantageous to the cultivator". It is also necessary to make certain that an adequate supply of bones is assured.

One of the most important means of agricultural improvement is the introduction of superior strains or varieties of crops and it is said that this is the main success of agricultural departments in India. "The crops in which the greatest advance has been made are cotton, wheat, rice, groundnut and jute, but there is still very great scope for further work especially in regard to the millets, pulses and oil seeds". In Ceylon, also, these last three classes of crops are awaiting improvement. The abridged report in discussing the three methods of obtaining superior varieties states: "These are selection, hybridisation and acclimatisation. Of the three, selection seems to be the most hopeful line and that which offers the greatest immediate possibilities of effecting improvement in Indian conditions".

The problem of the distribution of the improved seed so evolved is no less important than the actual work of selection. Frequently it is more difficult. Most of the following remarks on this subject from the abridged report are applicable to Ceylon. "For many years to come it seems probable that the work of seed distribution will have to remain in the hands of the agricultural departments. But if seed merchants of proved enterprise should be forthcoming, they should be given every encouragement. In present conditions the co-operative agency seems to offer the best prospects of assistance to the agricultural departments in seed distribution though private seed agents, as distinct from seed merchants, might also be employed. They should be persons on whom the agricultural departments can rely and should deal only with seeds supplied by the departments in sealed bags or packets. Until reliable seed merchants come into the business, the selection and distribution of pure seed should be controlled by the agricultural departments. It is not possible to lay down any rigid lines of policy. Departments must be guided by local conditions and must use such agencies as are available locally for the production and distribution of pure seed. But a considerable increase in the number of seed farms, both departmental and private, is very desirable".

Before any agricultural improvement which has been investigated and proved to be of utility by an agricultural department can affect agricultural practice it must be introduced to the cultivator in such a way as to persuade him of its benefits. "In a country in which illiteracy is so widespread as it is in India, ocular demonstration is the best method of convincing the cultivating classes of the advantages of agricultural improvement. But, before an improvement can be recommended for general adoption, it must be thoroughly tested on a government farm. It must be within the means of the cultivator to whom it is recommended and it must give a substantial

financial advantage either in increased outturn or in the reduction of his cultivation expenses. There are two methods of demonstration, the demonstration farm and the demonstration plot. Opinion is almost unanimous that the best and quickest method of influencing the practice of the cultivator is to demonstrate an improvement in crop or method on a small plot cultivated under departmental control or direction".

The Commission also points out the advantages of concentrating demonstration and propaganda work. In the introduction of an improved crop or variety this is very important. But it is of fundamental importance that no improved variety or method should be introduced to the cultivator before it has been thoroughly tested on government farms.

It will be instructive to give extracts from the report on two other major problems—credit facilities and public health. In India village agriculture is financed chiefly by money-lenders, partly by the network of co-operative credit societies which has been developed under the auspices of government, and to some extent by government loans under the Land Improvement and the Agriculturists' Loans Acts. In Ceylon the finance of village agriculture is almost entirely in the hands of money-lenders but in both countries indebtedness is the rule and the burden of debt is frequently severe. In the abridged report it is stated: "We have no hesitation in recording our belief that the greatest hope for the salvation of the rural masses from their crushing burden of debt rests in the growth and spread of a healthy and well-organized co-operative movement based upon the careful education and systematic training of the villagers themselves. Apart altogether from the question of debt, co-operative credit provides the only satisfactory means of financing agriculture on sound lines". But, lest the enthusiastic student of rural uplift think co-operative credit a simple panacea, the following remarks from the abridged report must be borne in mind. "The history of the Agricultural Bank of Egypt is, however, an instructive warning to those who hold that problems of rural debt are to be solved by the provision of cheap and abundant credit. In fact, cheap credit is a blessing to a rural population only where the average cultivator is possessed of the knowledge and strength of character required to induce him, on the one hand, to limit his borrowing within the range of his capacity to repay, and, on the other, to apply the greater part of the borrowed money to sound productive purposes."

The temptation to continue quoting is almost irresistible, but one more extract, on public health, must suffice. Public health, as the Commission points out, is one of the main factors affecting rural prosperity. "The close relationship between agriculture and public health is obvious and the two react upon each other to a remarkable degree. Economic wastage due to disease cannot be over-exaggerated. Malaria slays its thousands and lowers the economic efficiency of hundreds of thousands..... Any enquiry, therefore, into the general condition of agriculture and the position of the cultivator must take account of the public health aspect of his life, of the suitability of his diet, of the sanitary conditions under which he lives and of his general rural environment." In parts of at least two provinces in Ceylon malaria may be classified as one of the main factors affecting rural prosperity.

This review can only very inadequately indicate the value of the report. Nothing has been said here of the organization of agricultural research, the subdivision of holdings, animal husbandry, forests, irrigation, communications and marketing, education, or rural industries and labour, to each of which the report devotes a chapter.—L. L.