

AMBEWELA PILOT PROJECT FOR EDUCATED YOUTHS

BY P. M. WIJEKON, (G. A., Nuwara, Eliya)

THE biggest problem facing the hill country peasants is landlessness. He is, as it were, sandwiched between acres and acres of emerald green tea estates owned by companies and wealthy individuals and the beautiful natural forests that clothe summits of majestic hills. With the increasing population there is thus a tremendous pressure on land.

It is therefore with the intention of helping the hill country farmer that the Hon. Prime Minister, at a meeting of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on food production directed that proposals be submitted for the development of the hill country based on arable cropping as the principal form of farming.

Before formulating a plan for development, the Committee appointed to go into this matter had to take into consideration the following important facts regarding the availability of land. Apart from the vast extents of tea land there are 34,000 acres of land over 5,000 feet mostly covered with forest. According to the recommendations of the Land Use Committee this forest land should be left untouched in their natural state. There are 900 acres of patna land over 5,000 feet and 2,000 acres over 4,000 feet. Of these 11,000 acres the areas where the slope is less than 25° have been found suitable for development.

Instead of embarking on a wholesale development of the entire available area it was proposed to start a pilot project. For this purpose a suitable land was selected at Ambewela. The development of the balance patna land depends on the success or failure of this project.

Nature has ordained that agriculture should be the natural activity of man in the greater part of the World. Despite this fact prior to Independence when the majority of our people were dominated by a Colonial outlook and a false sense of values, agriculture was looked down almost with disdain. At that time even a minor employee in Government Service or a uniformed waiter in a big hotel commanded more respect than a farmer. With the dawn of independence however, the outlook has completely changed. Now a good farmer is respected and he has a place in Society. The younger generation can handle their mammoths as deftly as they wield their pens. It is only essential that the Government should give a helping hand to these young men in the initial stages of their farming career till they can stand on their own feet.

A scheme for the development of this land has been prepared after much thought and care. From experience it has been found that the economical unit for a small holding should be 3.5 acres. Of this extent 3 acres will be devoted to rotational farming while the balance $\frac{1}{2}$ acre will be used as the homestead area for poultry farming, pig rearing and horticulture. The man-power needed for the activities in the farming area and the subsidiary activities in the homestead can easily be met from an average-sized peasant family. Educated youths will be attracted to this scheme as the income from $3\frac{1}{2}$ acre unit will be considerable.

The 3 acre block for arable farming will be divided into 3 one-acre blocks. In one of these potatoes will be grown. After gathering the crop vegetables will be grown here in the next season. The other two acres will be in pasture. With the rotation of crops there will thus be always 1 acre under potatoes or vegetable and two acres under first and second year grass. This type of rotation of potatoes with grass has the following advantages:—(1) improvement of soil fertility; (2) economic return from milk and (3) prevention of soil erosion. In the homestead area pear trees will be planted while any balance area available can be used for cultivation of strawberries and exotic vegetables.

The assistance to the youths will take the form of a loan and not a subsidy. There will be three types of loans—(a) long-term loans for construction of house, livestock housing and stores, (b) medium-term loans for purchase of machinery and (c) short-term loans for cultivation, fertilizers and insecticides. The only subsidies that will be given to these youths are Rs. 20 for purchase of a bed, Rs. 30 for implements, Rs. 30 for clothing and Rs. 15 per youth for recreational facilities.

The following gives an idea of the expenditure involved:—

		Rs.	c.
Buildings	{ House Livestock-housing Stores }	7,000	0
Development of Land	2,430	0
Livestock and equipment (3 cows and 5 Sprayers)	3,300	0
Livestock and equipment to be owned communally (per 10 units) (one stud bull, 2 two-wheel tractors, trailers and other equipment)	Rs. 35,300	0
		per 10 Units	3,530 0
<i>Overheads</i>			
(Water supply access roads, wadiyas, office, etc.)	6,720	0
		Total	22,980 0
 The operational costs are as follows :—			
Planting 2 acres pasture	2,060	0
Maintenance of livestock	2,600	0
Planting 1 acre potatoes	2,475	0
Planting 1 acre vegetables	1,095	0
Planting homestead allotment	65	0
		<u>8,295</u>	<u>0</u>

It has been estimated that the income during the first year will be Rs. 3,220.00 while in the second year it will go up to Rs. 5,970.00. This is exclusive of the amounts that have to be repaid for the loans taken.

Ten agriculturally qualified youths with good physique who will not be discouraged by initial set backs and difficulties, have already been selected for this pilot Scheme. There are some more suitable youths who are able and willing to cultivate but they have no land available for development. Many such youths will be taken when the Scheme expands. Scientific methods will be adopted by these young men in the agricultural activities. These youths will be the pioneers of a Scheme which gives promise of success. It is on the basis of results achieved by these youths that more young men will be settled. It is hoped to have settlements of about 40 families with 20 acres for homesteads and 120 acres for farming.

This is one of the best ways of settling educated youths to a life of farming. They will be assured of a considerable income and a comfortable life. The unemployment problem too will be partly settled. The youths will be engaged in productive work instead of becoming disgruntled and unemployed men wasting their talents and becoming a burden on society. Given the necessary help and facilities our young men will always rise to the occasion. There is every hope of this Scheme becoming a success. Let us hope that before long we will be able to see the rolling patna dotted with houses, green with cultivation and humming with the productive activity of smiling and satisfied men and women.