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Some aspects of cotton industry in India

The cultivation of cotton in India dates back to pre-historic times. Until a few years ago our only sources of information regarding the antiquity of cotton were scanty references in religious books, which left it uncertain whether India or Egypt was the first country to grow and manufacture cotton on a large scale. Recently, however, when the excavations at Mohenjodaro made 'the dead yield up their secrets', a few specimens of beads, razor blades and other household articles were unearthed, which were found to be wrapped up in some kind of textile material. Time had treated this material none too gently, it was so tender that it fell to pieces in handling; with great care, however, some pieces of fibres and bits of yarn were removed from it, and these showed unmistakably the characteristics of cotton. It was thus proved, beyond a shadow of doubt, that the world is indebted to India for the first steps in the cultivation and manufacture of cotton, which to-day constitutes over 75% of all the textile materials.

These tests, which were carried out at the Technological Laboratory of the Indian Central Cotton Committee, further revealed the fact that as far back as 3500 BC, not only was cotton being cultivated in India, but that its manufacture had reached a surprisingly high standard for those ancient times. Since then the cultivation and manufacture of cotton in India made a steady progress, until, in the middle ages, the fame of her fabrics

spread far and wide, and she did a flourishing trade in textiles with other countries. The enchanting beauty of her muslins and nainsooks and the amazing variety in design and colour of her fabrics have become legendary and need no repetition; what is perhaps not generally known is the fact that, as late as 1815, India exported to England alone cotton goods worth £ 1,300,000. These halcyon days of industry and prosperity were followed by a dark period of decline and depression, when India lost not only the major part of her export trade in cotton fabrics, but also the seed of some of her best cottons. The development of her own textile mills and the demands for raw cotton from outside markets helped to revive the industry and to expand the area under cotton. During the last few decades efforts have been concentrated upon improving the quality of the indigenous types or upon the introduction of exotic varieties, which may give a higher monetary return to the grower. Although these efforts have, to some extent, been thwarted by bad picking, defective ginning, adulteration, watering, etc., it can be claimed that a very definite measure of success has already been achieved.

... But India of to-day is not a mere cotton-producing country. Beginning in a modest way in 1851, her textile industry has developed steadily until in 1937 her 370 mills, equipped with over 9 million spindles and nearly 2,00,000 looms employed over 4,00,000 hands, and produced more than 3,000 million yards of cloth. Even these huge figures do not complete the picture; India, after satisfying the major portion of her own needs, has been able to export every year nearly 3 million bales, worth about Rs 30 crores, in these days of low prices, to other countries. Thus, if we consider the triple aspects of cultivation, manufacture and export trade, cotton represents easily the largest and the most highly organised industry of India.

The cultivation of cotton in India possesses certain features, which are not seen, at least to the same extent, in the other principal cotton-growing countries. It will be instructive to consider them

briefly. In the first place, cultivation of cotton in India is not confined, as is the case in the United States of America or Egypt, to a narrow belt in which the soil and climatic conditions do not undergo large variations. With the exception of Bengal, Bihar, Assam and the N.W.F. Province, cotton is grown over the entire length and breadth of this sub-continent. This wide-spread cultivation has two important consequences. Firstly, owing to the widely different conditions of soil and climate prevailing in different parts, the Indian cottons range in quality from the coarse and short-stapled Bengals (which incidentally are not grown much in Bengal) to the fine and long-stapled Sind-Egyptian or Punjab-American 289 F. Probably no other country in the world offers such a striking contrast either in the times of sowing and harvesting of its cottons or in their physical characters. Secondly, each large tract has its own special problems of varietal improvement, agronomy, cotton diseases and pests, etc.; and though co-ordination is desirable to avoid duplication, it is necessary that botanical, physiological and agronomical researches must be carried out at several centres. For this purpose funds, and more funds, are required, which should be made available in view of the position which cotton occupies in our national economy and industrial development. . . .

... During the last two decades considerable amount of work has been done in evolving new and improved varieties, in which the Indian Central Cotton Committee has played a very important part. This work has entailed the labours of a large number of research workers and the expenditure of moderately large sums of money. It is capable of yielding the best results only if the varieties so evolved are grown in a pure state and presented to the customers in an unadulterated and clean condition. If these pre-requisites are not fulfilled, neither the growers nor the consumers would get the fullest benefit from the efforts of the research worker, who is sometimes blamed by persons, not in the know of facts, for not producing spectacular results. . . .