

THE ECONOMIC WEEKLY

Miss How Many Meals?

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THE sound and fury is over. Only a few weeks ago we heard bold declarations that the country will do without PL 480, that crash programmes for self-sufficiency in food were all but ready. The Food Minister himself has now admitted squarely that there is not going to be any forgoing of grain imports; that anybody who thinks of such a possibility is living in a fool's paradise. Of course, he has hastened to add that PL 480 food does not imply any American influence over our policy making. Ambassador Chester Bowles need not have given the bland patronising assurance about PL 480 wheat being non-political: the Food Minister himself has rebuked all those who suspect any such evil design in the State Department in Washington. Only, one wonders, why did everyone get so worked up over the issue only a few weeks back?

Have we, after all, discovered that no "crash programmes", however inspired, are going to increase agricultural production in the next few months? Have we been sobered by the continuing arrival of news of crop failures and near-famine conditions in different parts of the country? Or has the change, coinciding with the return to India of S K Patil, got something to do with any decisions taken in Washington or any discreet and tacit commitments given by Prime Minister Shastri's "special envoy" who, according to the Food Minister, did not have any brief to discuss food with the US Administration?

The change in attitude is not of the Food Minister alone; Congress MPs are reported to have vociferously advocated all-out import of food, as much as possible, from US and other countries. It is not that there is more wisdom in the matter among the Left parties; seven of them met in Delhi to discuss the Government's food policy but it cannot be said that they have come out with any new suggestions that could benefit the Agriculture Ministry. One supposes that Krishi Bhawan is not bereft of experts who could think of clearing forests and cultivating fallow lands and who know of the disincentive effect of loopholes in land reform measures. The Minister for Food and Agriculture is naturally not going to be a mere listener: as may be expected, he is constantly engaged in preparing plans to make the country self-sufficient in the near future. As late as on November 12 he announced on the floor of Parliament the impending finalisation of a comprehensive programme to that end.

It is no use harping on the theme of scepticism about such talk of revolutionising agricultural production: we are willing to wait patiently for the schemes to emerge and even more patiently for them to be implemented. But the problem, in the short run, is of distribution rather than of production, and the most excellent production programme, that might raise production by 25 per cent even in a single year, is irrelevant at the moment, with famine lurking round the corner, and here the failure of our food administration is staggering.

The only concrete programme that has emerged up till now is that of missing a meal—a programme that ignores the fact that if most people in India were to miss not more than one meal a week, the requirements of food would immediately rise by a staggering proportion! But what about statutory rationing, procurement and state trading? The latest position of the Food Ministry is that if any State wanted to resort to monopoly procurement, the Centre would not prevent it. The implicit assumption is that the Centre is willing and in a position to prevent a State Government from doing anything in the matter of food distribution. Experience in the past does not show that the assumption is correct—whether the inhibiting factor is more political than constitutional is irrelevant. Considering the way the Centre is engaged in the apparently endless process of persuading the States to come to some sort of a unified policy and the way it is still unable to take decisions on any issue, whether it be rationing or procurement or levies, it is to be feared that the slogan of "miss a meal" will lead the way to "miss two meals" and "miss three meals" and so on. After all, the food problem can *always* be solved if enough people miss enough meals. And that's probably how it will be solved in the coming months.

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