

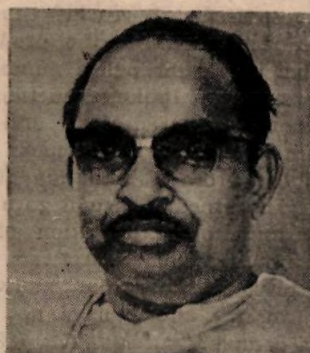
## A face-lift for cardamom

By Prof. K. M. CHANDY \*

The fruit of *Elettaria Cardamomum*, commercially known as cardamom, is a rare foreign exchange earning spice which deserves to be treated as one among the 'favoured few'. Its export earnings have been on the increase and have reached the peak of Rs. 12.78 crores in 1974-75, though the quantity exported for the realisation of this amount was 1,542 m. tonnes which is only about two-thirds of the exports during 1961-62. India exported 2,364 m. tonnes of cardamom during 1961-62, which was the largest quantity we sold in the world market in any year during the last one and a half decades.

In propitious years with favourable weather conditions India has been able to produce about 4,000 m. tonnes of cardamom. With the present planted area of 82,467 hectares, a crop of 4,000 m. tonnes is not beyond our reach, but in recent years the production has declined to about 2,500-2,700 m. tonnes. Our own internal consumption would come to about 1,000 m. tonnes, and the rest is sold in the world market, to over 60 countries. Prominent among the buyers are countries in the Middle East, which account for almost 75% of our exports. The accompanying table gives an idea of the trend of our production and exports.

The table shows that the increase in the planted area is not reflected in production by a corresponding increase. As a matter of fact if we compare the production of 1963-64 with that of 1974-75, it can be seen that the production fell by 1,430 m. tonnes even though area planted increased by 7,329 hec. This shrinkage had serious repercussions; our supply position became unsteady and we lost the Scandinavian and other West European Markets. We are on our way out from the Swedish market which was once our monopoly. High price of Indian cardamom, apart from the unpredictability of our supplies, was another disadvantage we had in recent times. In 1963-64, the price realisation per kg. was only Rs. 13.88, while it rose to Rs. 82.83 in 1974-75. Guatemala and Tanzania,



the other two major producing countries, who could offer cheaper cardamom have made real inroads into our

But it does not consume the entire quantity purchased; part of it is sold to neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia tops the list of cardamom consuming countries. Their annual import is of the order of 600 to 850 m. tonnes. Sweden comes next, with an offtake of 250 to 300 m. tonnes. Bulk of Saudi Arabia's imports are from India, the rest being met by supplies from Sri Lanka, Guatemala and Imports from neighbouring countries like Kuwait and Bahrain.

The periodic imbalances caused by upward and downward spurts in

Year	Area (Hect.)	Production (M. tonnes)	EXPORTS		
			Quantity (M. tonnes)	Value (Rs./crores)	Price (Rs./Kg.)
1960-61	55,761	3,353	2,034	3.67	18.07
1961-62	57,134	3,205	2,364	3.58	15.17
1962-63	57,428	3,400	2,259	2.67	11.82
1963-64	75,147	4,130	2,306	3.20	13.88
1964-65	75,147	2,200	1,503	2.71	18.08
1965-66	75,147	2,000	1,134	4.22	37.28
1966-67	75,147	2,700	1,590	7.95	50.04
1967-68	75,412	2,400	1,451	7.02	48.42
1968-69	75,412	2,100	1,291	6.73	52.18
1969-70	81,566	2,300	1,149	8.93	77.70
1970-71	81,566	3,170	1,705	11.21	65.78
1971-72	86,084	3,690	2,185	8.18	37.49
1972-73	82,467	2,510	1,475	7.39	50.14
1973-74	82,467	2,585	1,813	11.55	63.71
1974-75	82,467	2,700	1,542	12.77	82.83

Note: Production — for Crop Year (September to August)  
Export — for Financial Year (April to March)

traditional markets and have established their foothold. Still in certain affluent countries we manage to retain our hold, mainly because of our superior processing techniques.

Kuwait, one of the most affluent countries in West Asia provides the biggest market for Indian cardamom.

prices is another disturbing factor. When the prices went up very high, we lost many markets and when it dropped down, we did not regain any of them as we have been replaced by others who could offer still cheaper cardamom. If Indian cardamom is to be competitive in international markets, we have to offer the spice at prices acceptable to the overseas buy-

\* Chairman, Cardamom Board.



ers and at the same time remunerative to the growers. In this context the formation of the Cardamom Community proposed by the Government of India to bring together the cardamom producing countries to avoid unhealthy competition in the international market is a step in the right direction.

We may have to bring about remarkable reduction in the cost of production to improve our competitiveness. Cost of production could be brought down only if the per unit production is appreciably increased. To achieve these, two things are necessary; first of all the uneconomic units in the smallholding sector have to be converted into viable plantations and secondly, science and technology should be brought to the aid of the planter by evolving new strains with potential yield characters. Effective methods to control and eventually eliminate pests and diseases, apart from improving the processing techniques, will have to be adopted.

In cardamom, as in coffee and rubber, small growers whose capacity for providing inputs and adopting intensive cultural practices is low, dominate the production scene. Almost 92% of the cardamom cultivators are small growers possessing units of less than 20 acres in size. The large growers, whose capacity for production and for adoption of improved processing techniques are comparatively better, number only 1,239 out of the total of 16,074 planters whose estates have been registered so far. Majority of them are efficient planters and the rest may be able to attain efficiency with a little effort. But in our socio-economic set up the small producer is an important factor in any field of production and his capacity to increase productivity has also to be necessarily improved. The Cardamom Board is implementing a few aid schemes to modernise the small-holding sector, but this is not enough.

One area where the small planter can utilise his organised efficiency is in the field of processing and marketing of the produce. Today his processing is crude and he is totally depend-

ent on the marketing mechanism of either the auctioneer or the dealer, including the itinerant merchant who advances money and collects the meagre harvest. Before it reaches consumers from the hands of the producer, cardamom passes through a number of intermediaries — brokers, auctioneers, commission agents, dealers and the exporters. Here too many cooks tend to spoil the broth. Elimination of unnecessary intermediaries will go a long way to minimise exploitation of the grower. Though the Board has been trying to streamline the marketing mechanism, the efforts have not been so far a complete success. The 1% discount in weight demanded and accepted by the trade as a customary practice in the high ranges of Kerala is no doubt an unfair trade practice. Regulations were introduced to eliminate this evil, but these were called in question in the Court. The high Court of Kerala examined the matter and has upheld the Board's authority to introduce such reforms. However, at least a section of the trading community is not yet reconciled to the situation. Direct participation by growers' cooperatives in marketing is one useful step to remove the deficiencies in the present marketing system. The near monopoly enjoyed by a few traders, is a peculiar situation obtained in this commodity and the reactions of these to the reforms have unfortunately weighed much to decide the course of events in the primary marketing centres.

Cooperative marketing in cardamom has not created any serious impact in the trade today, except perhaps in the Coorg District in Karnataka State. Marketing in cardamom requires large financial investment. Though economically viable societies exist now in almost all the cardamom growing centres, their activities have not created sufficient impact in the market. Lack of adequate financial resources is the major impediment. Loan schemes operated by the Board and the State Governments in the cooperative sector do not provide enough capital. An inflow of imaginative and purposeful institutional credit can certainly activate cardamom trade by these cooperatives. Short-term working finance, which will

essentially mean production credit, will be one of the methods for assisting the small planter in attaining higher productivity and economic returns. Institutional finance for a cooperative venture would be forthcoming provided the society is able to carry on the functions efficiently. The Board can help opening up channels of production credit by linking credit with marketing. The cooperatives can also undertake processing of crop received from their members and act as group processing centres where quality control measures can be ensured. These will no doubt give greater competitiveness and higher income for the small planter. Any way a lot has to be done to modernise and streamline the marketing system.

One single factor that has contributed most to the declining trend in cardamom production is the inadequacy of scientific research. Cardamom plants are today seriously affected by pests and diseases, the most damaging among them being 'kutte', the killer disease. There is practically no cardamom plantation in India which can claim immunity to this disease. Research work has not progressed to any appreciable level to yield even a disease-resistant plant material. Unlike majority of other agricultural crops, there has been very little organised and sustained research efforts in cardamom, either in our country or outside. There is no precise information on many aspects of its production and processing. In the absence of any basic information, amplification of applied research and adoption of extension activities have only limited scope now.

The statute invests authority for development of the cardamom industry, including scientific research, with the Cardamom Board. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research, is the national organisation set up for research in different agricultural crops and animal science. While it is satisfying that some work in cardamom research is being done by the I.C.A.R. under the All India Coordinated Project for Spices and Cashew, it is far too short of the needs of the hour. The I.C.A.R. as an organisation responsible for research on a number of crops, may not be in a position to bestow as much attention,



in spite of its best intentions, as the Cardamom Board or the planting community would desire to give to research. The planter is becoming impatient. His planting material is the age-old variety. There is no remedy for the ravaging diseases. While consistent strides have been made in other crops is plant improvement, disease control and higher productivity, cardamom planter is helplessly looking aghast at the Board and I.C.A.R. to bring science and technology to his aid. Unless the problem of 'katte' disease is tackled on a war-footing and a planting material resistant to the disease evolved, the unequal race between the disease and the control measures may end up in the total ruination of the plantations in the not-too-distant future, when the disease may have overtaken the control measures. Only a coordinated effort can save cardamom from this situation. The research work undertaken by the existing institutions should be coordinated. The Cardamom Board, a body authorised under an Act

of Parliament to bring about around development of the industry, has to concern itself effectively with research activities rather than feel content with application of techniques discovered once in a while by an agency whose attention is demanded by as many crops as there are in India.

A long course of protracted dialogue between the Cardamom Board and the I.C.A.R. since 1966, have recently culminated in a decision to allow Cardamom Board set up a Research Centre with the active assistance of the I.C.A.R. The Board has to administer this centre with its own finance and the I.C.A.R. will extend technical collaboration. A project report for establishing the centre is under preparation. It is hoped that this centre would be a base for launching ambitious programmes for realisation of the dreams of the planting community.

Research on processing the crop is also an area where we have to bestow

adequate attention. Today Indian Cardamom retains its hold on many foreign markets because of the better processing techniques we adopt in quality maintenance. There are potential cardamom competitors in the overseas markets, who can improve their product to match or even outshine our material. We have to undertake studies to improve consistently the processing techniques. The Board has taken up the matter with the Central Food Technological Research Institute and they have taken up a project for undertaking research on processing improvements on behalf of the Cardamom Board.

To sum up, disease control measures, planting material improvement, evolving healthy and sound agronomical and cultural practices, introduction of new processing techniques, and streamlining of the marketing system demand immediate attention.

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