

ACTIVITIES OF MERCHANTS IN THE 1924 FLOOD OF TRAVANCORE AND IN THE 1940

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Abstract

The article is a comparative study of the price hike of rice and other necessary items in the flood year of 1924 and in the War year of 1940. The flood and War affected the import of rice to Cochin from Rangoon. In the flood year merchants increased the prices of rice and other necessary items. And in the 1940, the freight charge for steamers increased considerably, this resulted the shortage of rice in Alleppey. Both these years complaints were arose against the high price for rice and freight charge. Besides this Japan and Europe purchased Burma rice in large quantities resulted high demand for rice and the price of rice rose to a sharp increase.

Key words: Alleppey, Halai Merchants, Chakra, Paisa

INTRODUCTION

The merchants of Alleppey complained about the shortage of rice stocks in their market, the Halai merchants at Alleppey reported to the government that usually they sold 1000 to 2000 bags of rice per day. But now there was not a sufficient stock of rice bags. The Halai merchants at Alleppey complained about the situation. The port officer reported the situation to chief Secretary. The similar situation occurred at the time of thonnuttionpathile Vellappokkam or in the flood year of 1924.

REASONS FOR THE HIGH PRICE OF RICE

The merchants at Alleppey wrote their complaint to the port officer. According to them, "The freight charge for steamers from Rangoon to Alleppey before the war was Rupees one for per ton. The similar charge was paid in the Cochin port by the Cochin merchants. Since the war it rose to Rupees one and eight chakra. The rise in price was done by B.I and Asiatic and Scindia Companies. Besides this freight charge raised from Rupees one and eight chakras to 2 Rupees at the ports of Quilon and Trivandrum. The transportation charge can be reduced if they received bags of rice from Cochin to Alleppey. The transportation charge for the same was Rupees one and nine paisa, otherwise price would be Rupees two and

seven paise. Therefore merchants at Alleppey preferred rice bags from Cochin” (Rice Situation at Alleppey, Confidential file, 1940).

“The landing charge for the hundred bags from steamers charged into an increased price of Rupees 15, and this was levied by Madura Company, Peirce Leslie and M Dharams Waglaljee. But in other ports of Mangalore, Cannanore, Tellicherry and other ports, they demanded only 12 Rupees and eight Chakra. At Quilon it was the Messrs Harrisons and Crosfield and Mr Pereira representing the Scindia Company and charged Rupees 13 and eight Chakras for paddy and 14 Rupees and eight chakras for rice. At Trivandrum Mr Pereira, Peirce Leslie and Madhura Company charged rupees 17 and 3 chakras for paddy and rice. This landing charge was raised long before the war” (Rice Situation at Alleppey, Confidential file, 1940).

“From the steamers the bags were taken to the government go – downs, and it was dutiable. This cost roughly two plus two to the merchants. If the merchants directly took these bags, it costs only Rupees three. Because of these problems, merchants demanded that there was not much profit in taking stocks. The whole of Devicolam, Kottayam and half of the Quilon collected their rice stock from Cochin. And if government did not do anything, its better to convert trade to Travancore. The other thing was that Japan and Europe purchasing Burma rice at very large quantities and it led to the sharp increase in price of rice” (Rice Situation at Alleppey, Confidential file, 1940).

The port officer reported to the chief Secretary that, “there is a stock of about 10 to 15 thousand bags of rice at Alleppey and the usual sale of rice per day is 1 to 1^{1/2} thousand bags. Messes Hoosen Kasam Dada, Adam Hajee Peer Mohammed and Diwan Hajee Peer Mohammed are the three Halai whole sale merchants and they have now about 2000 bags in each stock. These Halai as well as the other merchants do not depend entirely upon Alleppey landings and they freely getting consignments from Cochin” (Archival Sources, Confidential, 1940). He further noted that “any revision in the landing rates could be made only by the conference Line Principals – the three steamship owners Messers, The British India Steam Navigation Co. Ltd, The Asiatic Steam Navigation Co. Ltd, and the Scindia Steam Navigation Co. Ltd., act concurrently in this matter. The rates to Cochin and Travancore ports have been altered. In the Alleppey rate is higher

compared to other ports. The steamer companies, if asked about the increase they may give the following to justify their action:

- the quantity landed into Alleppey or any of the Travancore ports is only a fraction of what is landed at Cochin.
- the different conditions for working steamers in open roadsteads as at Alleppey and the sheltered harbor as at Cochin. Even at the best of time it will take many more hours more to discharge a steamer at Alleppey than is necessary at Cochin.
- Absence of return loads. These are cogent facts” (Archival Sources, Confidential, 1940).

He also narrated that, “it was not easy to adopt immediate remedial measures either to considerably increase the volume of trade or to improve the working conditions at the open roads. Here the peculiar circumstances due to the war had to be considered. The Halai merchants in Cochin had their branches in Travancore and they are practically controlled from Cochin. The proprietors are in Burma. They have crude methods of business and the local merchants ignorant about the policy of the proprietors. These branch managers are now clamouring for the reduction of freights. Their offices in Cochin cannot in propriety move against a proposal for such reduction”.

He continued that, “they can easily bring pressure on the steamer owners for making a reduction in the rates, if only their offices in the Rangoon and Akyab make a united demand. The business is entirely in their hands so far as Travancore and Cochin are concerned and they can well afford to charter steamers. Their threat would be more effective, than any requisition from any other body. Even they have not negotiated for over side delivery to them as the steamer agents make a profit from the landing charges. If the merchants press for over side delivery and if they make their own arrangements they can get competitive rates and reduce the landing charges. The schedule of boat hire sanctioned by government may be modified to suit the purpose. Of the landing charges the only two items fixed by government are the boat hire and pier dues. The existing rates for rice can be reduced. Similar reductions under other items could be made by the agents under the present circumstances. But the Madhura Company and the Peirce Leslie co. are the agents of the British India and Asiatic

Lines both at Alleppey and Cochin and they know what they lose at Alleppey they will get at Cochin. He suggested that government may take up the question with the Travancore Chambers which represent the steamer agents and the Alleppey Chamber which represents the Halai merchants. It will be easier for the Chamber to get the agents and the Halai together. The charges for the different ports vary, but the agents may be required to render the reduced rates for rice applicable to all Travancore ports. Even now it is customary at Alleppey port to give delivery of rice bags from the custom wharf as so as they are landed and stacked and it is only when the consihnees are not ready to clear the cargo, these bags are stored in the godowns.

Messrs The Asiatic Steam Navigation Co., and the British India Steam Navigation Co.Ltd, have their rice godowns at the customs and I understand that they do not charge godown rent and it is the surplus cargo that is removed to government sheds for storage. It is stated that if the delivery is made without taking these bags to government godowns the merchants gain rupees 3. The Halai merchants have to pay about rupees 5/8 per 100 bags for removal from the custom godowns to their own godowns in their shops and if they are able to sell the consignment direct to the merchants from the customs godowns, they gain rupees 5/8. The merchants are free to clear and remove the bags soon after landing provided they take the necessary delivery orders from the steamer agents in proper time. If their complaint relates to the godown rent payable, I may suggest that the period for free storage in government sheds may be extended to two or three weeks. The revenue realized from godown rent from rice for the last three years is as follows.

Years	Godown rent realized from rice and paddy		
	Rs.	As.	Ps
1113	650	11	7
1114	449	1	1
1115	356	14	11

With a view to remove their complaints, the free period may be fixed as three weeks. A reduction in boat hire to the extent of BRe.1-4-0 per 100 bags at Alleppey, the extension of the period for storage in government godowns and the reduction of the landing charges by the steamer agents by rupees two would go to a certain extent to give relief to the merchants. But the freight has gone up by

Rs.10/8/0 per hundred bags and it will not be possible to give relief to compensate fully the increase in freight. So far as Trivandrum and Quilon are concerned Mr J.E.A Pereira is the chief landing agent and he may be able to reduce the landing charges to some extent. From the local Halai merchants understand that the cost per bag of rice at Cochin and at Rangoon is more than rupees 10, whereas the rates fixed by government is less than rupees ten. The government rate has to be revised from time to time, to be on par with the rates at Cochin or Rangoon. Supply of rice to Devicolam, Kottayam etc are obtained from Cochin by certain merchants of those places who placed to Cochin mainly for the purchase of Dhal and other grain, chilli etc. procurable there at cheaper rates". In the case of 1924 flood Merchants at Travancore complained the illegal price hike made by the merchants at Cochin" (Archival Sources, Confidential, 1940).

Rates of landing charges for 100 bags

Alleppey	Rs-As-ps	Cochin	Rs-As-Ps
Landing charges	15	Landing charges	10
Loading charges	2	Loading charges	2-8-0
Canal boat hire	2	Boat hire to Alleppey	7-8-0
Unloading at godowns	1-8-0	Unloading	1-8-0
Marine insurance	3-2-0	Marine insurance	1-6-0
Total	23-10-0	Total	22-14-0

Mr. K R Narayana Aiyar, Member of Legislative Council remarked that the measures that to be adopted for improving agriculture and increasing the yield of foodstuff by extending agricultural lands in order to meet the security of food materials in our state due to war. If we compare the crop yield obtaining in different parts of India and the world, we will find the yield per acre in Travancore in regard to the most important food crop is comparatively very low. The chief point that has to be borne in mind therefore is intensive cultivation and increased outturn of crops by means of scientific methods (Travancore Legislative Council, 1942, p.161). Mr Rajyasevapravina G. Parameswaran Pillai, Member of Legislative Council also supported the arguments of Mr. K.R Narayana Aiyar and said that government propose to take steps to bring into cultivation large areas available and suitable for the purpose both in regard to paddy and other food stuffs (Travancore Legislative Council, 1942, p.165).

CONCLUSION

The port officer enquired the situation and reported to the Chief Secretary to the measures to be taken in this situation. They adopted the policy of non interference. The landing charges of the steamers were fixed by the foreign companies. Therefore they followed the policy of non interference.

REFERENCES

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