Seeds of Trade -
Crops That Transformed
Humanity

Harpal S. Saini

History is full of the exploits of men and women – their actions are identified as causing change, development and catastrophe. If it pleases people to read and to be told that these things happened as the direct and absolute interventions of human, then this is no surprise – for humans have always liked to believe in their own influence and directions in the course of history. These claims, however, sometimes conceal the truth. The vital and largely unrecognized factor that changed the course of history from time to time is not the human beings, but seeds – the tiny, powerful living entities.

Historical Facts

What led Europeans to spread all over the globe in post-Renaissance times? It has nothing to do with religion or the rise of capitalism – but it had a great deal to do with seeds: the pepper. In the middle age pepper was essential to flavor otherwise insipid vegetables and to mask the taste of rotten meat and stinking fish. By the beginning of the sixteenth century Venice had become rich, famous and beautiful from the profits of the pepper trade. This prompted the great Portuguese, Italian and Spanish explorers to reach the Orient in search of pepper and the Americas were discovered as a by-product of this search. Likewise, the tiny seeds of quinine, sugar cane, tea, cotton, potato and tobacco have played a dynamic role in the socio-economic transformation of humanity.

Quinine cured one of the great banes of existence in Europe, Asia and West Africa: malaria. It enabled the white man to open up the tropics and develop great empires. White settlements became possible – only because of quinine – in areas which hitherto had been defended more ably by disease than by any human agency. Quinine facilitated the transfer of vast numbers of people across the continents as cheap labour. Without quinine they would have died in their new home. The catastrophe of two world wars can be attributed to the seeds of quinine, without which the nations would probably have been unable to fight either of the two wars.

Sugarcane seeds (cuttings) taken by the white man to the West Indies at the time of the Renaissance and cultivated on plantations by black slaves, the only people who could work in the climate, was the cause of the infamous slave trade. All this was for the sake of a product which is wholly superfluous in the diet, a luxury when expensive and a menace when cheap. It led to diverse of human miseries since, after the acknowledged drugs; sugar is probably the most damaging of the commonly consumed addictive substances.

Seeds of tea followed the pepper as the major Eastern trade; by 1700 it had become one of the great non-alcoholic drinks and ruled the drawing-rooms for 250 years. Spread of tea seeds accelerated the decline of China, a country whose civilization was highly sophisticated when Europe was inhabited by barbarians, and the Americas were many centuries away from discovery. The exchange of opium for tea over more than a century was a crime which no-one, even today, acknowledges as the man-made catastrophe that it was.

Tea was more than an incident in the American War of Independence. It was instrumental in the development of porcelain in Europe and China, permanently influenced sailing ship design, and by transfer in the nineteenth century, developed ‘garden’ in India and Sri Lanka which changed the history of the sub-continent.

Cotton seed taken to the uplands of southern states of the USA resulted in the explosion of American cotton trade, which grew in its lifetime from one bale to 4
AGROLESTARI CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

million, and included the whole history of Southern slavery and the American Civil War. On the way, cotton seed played a major part between a pre-steampower age in England, to dark satanic mills and back to the potato? Or was it? Why did the Irish adopt the potato at all? The potato seed and its culture is difficult to trace but it is believed to the potato with Irish history, in particular the great famine of 1845-46. But there are other questions that are not always asked. "Why was Ireland, alone of all western European countries, particularly suited to the potato? Or was it? Why did the Irish adopt the potato at all? Why did the population grow as it did, creating ideal conditions for famine? Why did the British espouse free trade as an apparent answer to Ireland's problem? Why, after mass emigration, did particular areas of the USA become Irish? - Which might be the chronic balance of payments deficit of the American colonies in the late 18th century. Tobacco chewing, for instance, an addiction which swept into the tribes of the Incas. The Incas were a small tribe settling around Lake Titicaca, the world's highest lake. The attraction of their economy for Spanish conquerors was gold and silver, but the Inca's real gift to this world was the seeds of the potato. Almost everyone connects the potato with Irish history, in particular the great famine of 1845-46. Tobacco, for instance, an addiction which swept into the tribes of the Incas. The Incas were a small tribe settling around Lake Titicaca, the world's highest lake. The attraction of their economy for Spanish conquerors was gold and silver, but the Inca's real gift to this world was the seeds of the potato. Almost everyone connects the potato with Irish history, in particular the great famine of 1845-46. Tobacco, for instance, an addiction which swept into the tribes of the Incas. The Incas were a small tribe settling around Lake Titicaca, the world's highest lake. 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