Kerala History and Studies Journal
Published by the Kerala History Conference
ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

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Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/4

Date of Release 28.11.2026

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Combating The Food Crisis During The Second World War Period -A Peep Into The Efforts Of The Native State Of Cochin

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Introduction

The outbreak of war in 1939 was accompanied by a steep rise in the price- level of all essential commodities. Press communiques issued by the Government directing the merchants not to put up prices failed to have the desired effect. Government intervention by price control and similar measures, therefore, became imperative and, as a first step in this direction, a notification to control and fix the prices of rice and kerosene oil was published on 12th September 1939. Mr. N. SreedharaMenon, Kanayannur Sub-Magistrate, was appointed Food Controller. A War Purposes Committee with the Dewan as President was constituted to control the prices of food stuffs and other essential commodities. A Central Advisory Committee consisting of the Chairman of the three major municipalities and four prominent Mattanchery merchants including the President of Indian Chamber of Commerce, Cochin and also Taluk Committees were organized to support War Advisory Committee. The Food Controller was invested with special powers, empowering him to advice the government to fix maximum selling price for any article, inspect the godowns and accounts of all dealers, and take such measures as might be necessary to control prices.

The sudden flutter in the rice market caused by the Declaration of War subsided soon, so that, Government withdrew the portion of the Order fixing prices for imported rice. The post of the Food Controller was abolished with effect from 27th November 1939. The warning issued by the Government had the desired effect for the time being. But with the deterioration of the war situation in France, prices both wholesale and retail, again shot up to fancy level. Government again constituted a Price Control Committee consisting of the Dewan Peishkar as President and five non-official members of the

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Legislative Council and the Chairman of the Ernakulam and Mattanchery municipalities as members. The first meeting of the Committee took place on 27th July 1941 at Ernakulam. A maximum selling price in respect of rice was fixed and brought into force. The question of sending an officer to Burma to try to get a larger supply of rice from there was also considered by the Government but this could not materialise. The entry of Japan into the war (December 1941) and the possibility of an attack on Burma made it imperative to have a more vigilant watch. A Conference in the Dewan's House on 12th December 1941 decided to take drastic action against retailers who were charging excessive prices and to open rice depot for the retail sale of rice in municipal areas. The Dewans of Cochin and Travancore met in conference and decided to take joint action to meet the food situation. The general food position continued to deteriorate rapidly. Government rice depots were opened in important places all over the state, rice being purchased from wholesalers and others and distributed to retailers at control rate. A "Rice Control Officer" was appointed to be in charge of their arrangements. The Dewan Peishkar was designated "Special Officer for Price" and given "Three Assistance Price Officers" under him to carry out resources for price control and rationing on an all-state basis.

On 1st July 1942 the "Food Grains Control Order" came into force, whereby all wholesale grain merchants were to take out licenses and submit regular returns of their stock, sales and purchases. The transport of paddy and rice except under a permit from the state was prohibited.

The Price Control Conference was convened at Delhi by the Central Government to have to coordinate such activities of provincial and state governments. In the fourth Price Control Conference held in February 1942 it was recognized that the accommodative of traffic to the most efficient use of the limited transport facilities available was a consideration of great importance and that control over distribution in co-ordination with transport arrangements might have to take precedence over control of prices.

Accordingly Regional Price and Supply Boards and Regional Transport Boards were constituted for seeing that the surplus areas within each region would feed deficit areas in the same region. Cochin along with Travancore was included in the Madras

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region and became entitled to send a representative each to these boards. With the organization of the Supply Department as a separate entity (independent of the revenue department) the Head of their department was made to represent the state in the Board The Dewans of Travancore & Cochin conferred together at "Bhaktivilas" Trivandrum on 27th June 1942 and arrived at the following decision :

a) Both the governments should make a joint representation to the government of India to have maximum price fixed for the various kind of rice at the source.
b) In view of the Madras Government's Order prohibiting the export of rice except on permit, both state should introduce a similar measure and also need to help each other in the event of a sudden food crises.
c) Both state would make joint arrangement for the import and distribute of the rice quota allotted for them.
d) The Price Officer for Cochin and the Travancore Agricultural Director should meet fortnightly at Trivandrum and Ernakulam, and fix and decide upon the permit to be issued for import by the Cochin merchants and the Travancore merchants through the board gauge and metregauge railways. Agreeably to the above, periodical meetings were held by both officers, and the Madras government sanctioned a monthly quota of 15,000 tons of rice from July to September 1942 which was apportioned between the two states in the ratio of 1:4 (according to population).

For having a Food Production Survey in accordance with the decision of the Regional Price and Supply Board in August 1942, a rough estimate of it was calculated by dividing the state into two blocks – the northern block comprising a portion of Trichur taluk, the whole of Talappilly and Chittur Taluk and the southern block comprising of the rest of Trichur and the taluks of Mukukundapuram, Cochin-Kanayannur and Crangannore. The Tahsildars with the assistance of the "Menon" of each village submitted the report.

With the fall of Burma into enemy hands, Cochin was faced with grim prospects of serious shortage of rice supply from outside. Comprehensive measures were adopted for the procurement and distribution of food grains. A separate "Civil

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Supplies Department" was created under the charge of a Commissioner of Civil Supplies in October 1942. A Madhav Prabhu was the first to hold the post.

The rapid growth and expansion of the several activities of the Department led to the appointment of a separate officer for each Taluk with adequate subordinate staff to help him. Supervising Control operations, working of the food grains and other control orders, checking transports and clandestine disposals of stocks storage of food stuffs and distribution of the same among the public were the main duties of the Assistant Supply Officers.

The period from about the middle of October 1942 to about the middle of August 1943 was the most difficult the state had to face in regard to food supply after the outbreak of war. The people of Cochin state were purely rice eaters except a small section of the poorer classes who supplemented it by taking tapioca. Since ninety percent of the imports came from Burma, after her fall, Cochin had to depend upon the state production and the munificence of the Madras government for sustenance. Madras had their own difficulties, but helped Cochin with substantial quotas between November 1942 to January 1943. But it was insufficient and she approached the Central Government. They allotted for the State of Travancore and Cochin a joint quota of 7,500 tons of rice from Sind and 10,000 tons from the Central Provinces.

In March 1943 the Central Government assumed direct responsibly for the supply of the essential food stuffs to all deficit areas including the states and central procurement scheme was launched, according to which, 50,000 tons of rice, 42,000 tons of millet and 2,600 tons of wheat were allotted for the Cochin state. Towards the end of July 1943 a new scheme, known as the "Revised Basic Plan" was introduced. Under it Cochin got 3,000 tons of rice and 3,000 tons of millet for the period from August 1943 to November 1943 and 8,000 tons of wheat and 1,800 tons of grain for the period from August 1943 to March 1944. The services rendered by Messrs Volkart Brothers, Cochin, who were the chief agents for the purchase and transport of food grains from Sind and other North Indian places were commendable. Then Dry grains such as Wheat, Bajra, Maize, Jucar and Barley were introduced as part of the general ration to the state to supplement the rice ration of the State and propaganda to

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popularize dry grains was carried out in the state. Cochin Restaurants were started by government to popularize use of dry grains.

A Paddy and Rice Acquisition and Distribution order was introduced from November 1942 whereby government assumed power to requisite all paddy and rice in the possession of agriculturists and other private persons above a specified quantity. Then government adopted the Grain Purchase Scheme whereby the whole crop in the state was being purchased by the government after allowing a reasonable quantity for the minimum bonafide equipment of the agriculturists.

The Cochin Paddy Acquisition Order, March 1943 was issued by which every person owning, cultivating or in possession or management of paddy lands in the state, aggregating not less than one acre, was required to submit a true and correct amount, within 7 day after the harvest was over, showing the actual yield and the exact quantity available for purchase by the government. The Director of Food supplies, Assistant Supply Officer, or the Tahsildar was given the power to inspect any paddy field. If any party was aggrieved with regard to the demand fixed, he had a right of appeal to the Director of Food Suppliers, while the government was the final appellate authority. The grain purchasing work proceeded fairly satisfactorily. The public also have on the whole co-operated with the officers of the government. The purchases, however, fell below expectations, because of partial failure of the Mundakan and the Kole and Puncha crops in the year.

To put down the attempt of hoarding and profiteering by merchants, maximum selling prices were fixed and published, from time to time, for all essential commodities and it was made an offence under the Defense of India Rules to sell these articles in excess of the control rates. Tapioca, Sugar, Kerosene, Salt, Fishes and Chillies were also brought under price control.

When the rice situation grew worse the rationing scheme was altered. It was arranged to open 100 “Fair Price Shops”, one in each of the 87 panchayat areas and the remaining 13 “Fair Price Shops” in places where a single shop would not suffice. The stocks necessary in these shops were replenished by government. Kerosene, oil and sugar were also arranged from here. Side by side with these shops, there was a licensed shop seen by reliable private merchants.

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The Cochin Rationing Order was enacted in February 1943 and according to the order, the ration was fixed in terms of units, one unit being ¼ *Edangali* of rice for adults and ½ a unit for children below 13 years. Cultivators or agriculturists who were allowed paddy under grain purchase scheme was not rationed and labourers in Rubber and Tea estate and members for the State Forces were given double ration. Crews of ships visiting Cochin port were also given additional half ration.

The departments of Revenue, Police, Excise and War publicity worked hand in glove with the Food Department in the strenuous efforts for the latter to make the people take to all available food. W.H. Kirby Esq., Rationing Advisor to the government of India visited Cochin to review the introduction of all round rationing in the state. He was generally satisfied with the system of rationing of the state. Dewan Bahadur, C.P. Karunakara Menon, Regional Food Commissioner, Madras was also along with Mr. Kirby.

The original idea of government was to make the supply scheme self-supporting as far as possible, but the food situation became acute and the prices began to shot up. So, the government proceedings No.21783/18 dated April 1943 stated that the burden of the establishment required for the grain purchasing and rationing scheme and controlling movement and prices should be charged to the state instead of its incidence being passed on the consumer. These measures went a long way in controlling the food crisis in the State.

Conclusion

During the period under review, the state had passed through a very severe crisis, unprecedented in the annals of its history. The state being not self-sufficient in many of its requirements was depending to a very large extent on the foreign state and provinces for the supplies. With the entry of Japan into the war against the allies, and their occupation of Burma, the main source of supply of rice to the state was cut off and it had to take steps to see that its people were saved from starvation. With this end in view on acestere rationing system was introduced which made no distinction between the rich and the poor, the high and the low. Besides, it launched upon a scheme of intensive cultivation of paddy, tapioca and other food stuffs. It took hold steps to conserve what little foodstuff it had for its own peoples use by control

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measures efforts made to popularize dry grains and millets to which the people of Cochin was not familiar also became a success. The helping hand extended by the Central government and Madras and Travancore, helped Cochin to pull through the crisis without breakdown.

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