

CHAPTER V

MESTA

5.1. Varieties of Mesta.—Mesta and Bimli which belong to the *Hibiscus* family are, by far, the most important jute substitute fibres. These fibres are produced from two cultivated varieties, viz. *Hibiscus Cannabinus* and *Hibiscus Sabdariffa Var Alissima*. In India the fibres of the *Hibiscus* family are known by different names in different places, e.g., it is called Mesta in West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and U.P., Gogu or Bimli in Andhra and Madras, Bombay Hemp in Bombay, Deccan Hemp in Hyderabad, etc. Outside India, a similar fibre, which is being grown as a serious potential rival of jute, is known as *Kenaf*. Of the two varieties, *Hibiscus Cannabinus* is a stronger fibre but is more susceptible to plant diseases while *Hibiscus Sabdariffa*, sometimes known as Rosela, is of inferior strength but it is easier to grow it and it is relatively free from plant diseases.

5.2. Cultivation of Mesta.—The cultivation of mesta has a number of economic advantages over jute, particularly over inferior varieties of jute. Unlike jute it does not require fertile soil for growth and can thrive well even in drier areas. Its cost of cultivation is lower as compared to that of jute, because as against three weedings required for the proper growth of jute, mesta can thrive well even if no weeding is done. It is, therefore often more convenient as well as profitable to the cultivator to grow mesta than an inferior variety of jute.

5.3. Production of Mesta.—Prior to the Devaluation of the Rupee in 1949, India produced only a very small quantity of mesta, most of which was exported to other countries. The consumption of mesta by the Indian mills, however, received stimulus after 1950 and its increasing popularity among mills in recent years is largely due to its cheapness as compared to that of jute. The production of mesta has consequently increased rapidly during the last few years as the following table will reveal:—

TABLE NO. 12

Area and Production of Mesta according to Reorganized States

(Area=000 acres)
(Production=000 bales of 400 lbs. each)

	1952-53		1953-54		1954-55		1955-56†		1956-57*	
	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction
Andhra Pradesh	237	394	138	292	179	326	123	270	124	261
Assam	3	8	3	9	3	4	5	9	5	11

	1952-53		1953-54		1954-55		1955-56†		1956-57*	
	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction	Area	Pro- duction
Bihar . . .	26	26	17	16	31	40	24	35	54**	105**
Bombay. . .	85	83	159	146	90	98	114	109	150	165
Madhya Pradesh . . .	46	26	25	21	22	25	25	21	24	19
Madras . . .	2	3	4	7	1	2	1	2	1	2
Mysore . . .	41	39	87	87	39	49	63	54	57	55
Orissa . . .	25	50	17	34	21	41	23	45	25	50
Punjab . . .	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
West Bengal . . .	18	51	12	36	141	431	193	613	297**	804**
TOTAL . . .	484	682	463	650	528	1081	572	1159	738	1474

† Partially revised figures. *Final Estimate.

**Relates to the set-up of States before Re-organisation.

5.4. It will be observed that the production of mesta has increased from about 7 lakh bales in 1952-53 to more than 14 lakh bales in 1956-57. The increase has been more marked in West Bengal where the production has gone up from 51,000 bales in 1952-53 to over 8 lakh bales in 1956-57. Andhra comes next where mesta production in 1956-57 was about 2.6 lakh bales. The other States where mesta is grown are Bombay, Bihar, Mysore and Orissa.

5.5. **Problems of Mesta Production.**—Our terms of reference required us, "to work out and recommend the proportions in which mesta and jute should be grown, particularly whether and how far the growth of mesta should be encouraged in any specified parts of the country". This question seems to have arisen mainly because some people are apprehensive of the rapid growth of mesta. They argue that if the production of mesta continues unregulated, it may soon replace jute, which would ultimately affect adversely the quality of our jute goods and our competitive position in the world markets. It is maintained by these people that in a competitive market buyers are likely to prefer, in future, pure jute goods instead of mesta—mixed goods and since Pakistan has a virtual monopoly in the relatively low-priced quality jute, India's position would, sooner than later, become vulnerable. We, therefore, addressed ourselves to two main issues, viz. (i) whether or not the admixture of mesta with jute in the production of jute goods, in future, will weaken our competitive position in foreign markets and (ii) whether mesta is replacing jute in certain areas and, if so, is it necessary to regulate its production.

5.6. **Admixture of Mesta with Jute.**—On the first issue we consulted a number of representatives of the jute trade and mills, most of whom were of the view that a judicious admixture of mesta with jute did not affect the quality of the fabric if proper care was taken. We were told that in

world markets pure jute Hessian enjoys a premium of hardly $\frac{1}{2}$ % over the mesta-mixed Hessian. An important jute mill-owner informed us that in his mill mesta was being mixed to the extent of 80% and they were able to sell their goods even in U.S. markets at the same rate as the pure jute Pakistani goods. In one of the big mills which we visited, and which had modern machinery, mesta was being used to the extent of about 60% in the manufacture of Hessian as well as Sackings. In another mill which we also visited, the consumption of mesta was reported to be about 25%; a larger use of mesta was not possible because of old machinery. The fact that the industry has so far been able to maintain its position in world markets even after mixing such a large percentage of mesta with jute, makes some people confident that there will not be any major set-back in our competitive position because of the use of mesta in the production of jute goods. The trade also feels that it will be able to take care of the foreign demand particularly of the quality-conscious or fastidious markets, and if at any time in future it is found that mesta mixed goods cannot compete with Pakistani pure jute goods, the mills will be able to adjust their production accordingly.

5.7. Mesta-mixed Goods and Foreign Markets.—While we fully realise the dangers of becoming complacent about the actual situation which India may have to face in the near future when Pakistan comes up as a formidable competitor in jute goods, we feel that there is no special reason at present to get alarmed at the admixture of mesta in the production of jute manufactures. Mesta and jute are very much alike in their spinning characteristics, though the admixture may affect slightly the quality of the finished goods. As far as the colour of the manufactures is concerned, mesta gives generally almost as good results as white jute. The proper admixture of mesta with jute, on the other hand, reduces the cost of jute appreciably and in those markets where consumers are more price-conscious than quality-conscious, mesta-mixed goods have certain advantages over goods manufactured from pure jute. We are also inclined to agree with the view that the mill industry will be able to take care of the requirements of the foreign markets and that the question of admixture of mesta with jute, and the extent to which it should be done, should better be left to it. Foreign demands are of varied nature and the industry has full knowledge about the preferences of the foreign buyers. Moreover, the internal consumption of jute goods has been increasing at a rather fast rate and even if it happens that no admixture of mesta with jute is possible for foreign markets, mesta can certainly be utilised for meeting the internal demand for jute goods.

5.8. We would, however, like to avoid giving an impression that the admixture of mesta in any proportion with jute will not be ultimately harmful to our jute trade. Pure jute goods will be always preferred to mesta mixed goods and as far as possible our attempt should be to grow more and more good quality jute. However, as there are limitations to the increase in the production of raw jute, at any rate in the Second Plan period, we feel that the production of mesta in suitable areas and the admixture of mesta in proper proportions may not, at least in the short run, affect our competitive position in the world markets. The present increase in the production of mesta is, therefore, in our opinion, not alarming in States other than West Bengal.

5.9. Quality of Indian Sacking.—There is, however, one point to which we would like to draw attention. Some of the Indian Sacking is said to be inferior in quality and is sold at a small discount in world markets as

compared to that of Pakistan. It is in this case that the danger to our competitive position is the greatest. Some of the people we interviewed were of the opinion that the inferior quality of our Sacking may be due to the use of mesta in its production; but, this view was discounted by the majority of the jute traders and millers. They said that the quality of our Sacking is poor because some of the mills use mostly cuttings, *habi-jabis*, etc., in their production of Sackings. Some of our Sackings also suffer from a number of manufacturing defects, *viz.* lack of uniform weaving, bad seaming and under-weight. It is because of these manufacturing defects and indifferent workmanship rather than the use of mesta, that these Sackings command a relatively lower price in the world market. We understand that the Indian Jute Mills Association is taking good care of the complaints received from the foreign buyers in respect of the manufacturing defects by conveying them to the mill concerned and, if necessary, by removing the name of the defaulting mill from the approved list. We hope, the steps already being taken by the Indian Jute Mills Association are sufficient, but in case they are found wanting, it will be desirable to examine the position and take suitable steps to maintain the reputation of our Sacking in foreign markets.

5.10. Regulation of the Production of Mesta.—Once it is accepted that the proper admixture of mesta is not likely to be detrimental to our foreign trade, the question of regulating its production is automatically answered. The problem before the country at present is to increase as much as possible the total internal availability of the fibre. In estimating the likely deficiency in our supply during the Second Five Year Plan, we have already assumed an increased production of mesta from 12 lakh bales in 1955-56 to 20 lakh bales in 1960-61 and if this is not achieved, our dependence on imports from Pakistan will increase much more. We have pointed out earlier that if the country is to be self-reliant, it is on the production of mesta that we have to depend very largely. Any curtailment or regulation of mesta production in general at this stage would, therefore, not be in the interest of the country's jute economy. On the other hand, it appears to us desirable and necessary to give more attention to the production of mesta than has been done hitherto. The State Governments also need to be informed specifically that the target of jute production fixed under the Second Plan represents only raw jute and not mesta. The production of mesta would be over and above the planned target of jute and hence they should consider the fixing of target for mesta separately.

5.11. Replacement of Jute by Mesta.—This brings us to our second question, *viz.* the replacement of jute by mesta in certain areas. The production of mesta in West Bengal, in particular, has gone up considerably in recent years. It is said that because of the convenience and cheapness of mesta cultivation, more and more jute lands are being brought under mesta. It is, therefore, feared that if the cultivation of mesta in West Bengal continues to increase at the existing rate, jute production in that State may receive a considerable set-back in not too distant a future. Such a situation, if it happens, would no doubt be undesirable. Although mesta is a useful substitute of low grade jute, good quality jute is always superior and preferable to mesta. The country is already in short supply of good jute, especially of white jute, and it would be unwise if the lands which are at present growing good jute are diverted to mesta production. We, therefore, feel that though there are valid reasons for not discouraging the production of mesta, the additional production should not be at the cost of jute and particularly of white jute. The position, therefore, needs careful examination

by each State Government and if it is found in a State that mesta is really replacing good quality jute in certain areas, suitable measures may have to be taken to regulate its production in those areas. In our opinion the problem at present can be said to have assumed some significance only in West Bengal and not in other States.

5.12. Encouragement of Mesta Production.—By and large, mesta production should be encouraged in those areas where the question of replacement of either paddy or jute does not arise. A list of such areas can be prepared only when a detailed survey of the lands put under jute, mesta and paddy, in each State, is made. From our discussions with the various jute interests we understand, however, that the following areas offer facilities for further production of mesta without affecting jute or paddy cultivation and if efforts are concentrated by the State Governments in these areas both the quality and quantity of mesta produced in the country will improve significantly:—

TABLE NO. 13

Areas where Mesta Production can be increased

<i>State</i>	<i>Centre</i>
Bihar	Purnea Baidyanath Jhajha Dalkola Samastipur
U.P.	Bareilly Bhajol Dekanal Pilibhit Rampur Chandausi Faizabad
Orissa	Sambalpur Bagharh Keshinga
West Bengal	Malda Asansol Sub-division Bishnupur Sub-division.
Andhra	Parvatipuram Patnattaam Vizianagram Nellimarla Poundura Sigadam Srikakulam Road Tilaru Sitanagram

5.13. Bimli Production in Andhra.—Mesta (Bimli) is grown to a considerable extent in Andhra. The quality of the fibre grown here is, however, considered to be inferior. The experts, however, think that if steps are taken to improve the quality of the fibre grown in this State and intensive efforts are made to increase the production, this State offers good

prospects for a substantial increase in the production of Bimli. At present most of the Bimli produced in Andhra is consumed by local mills. If the quality improves, it will certainly find good market in Calcutta. Moreover, in the areas where Bimli is grown in this State, there is no serious problem of the diversion of either jute or paddy lands to Bimli if the acreage under it increases. We feel, therefore, that if the quality of the fibre grown can be improved by improved seeds, better retting techniques, control of plant diseases, etc., Bimli production may be further encouraged in this State, particularly in Vishakhapatnam, Srikakulam and Guntur areas, which are suitable both from agronomic and transport cost point of view.

5.14. Bimlipatam jute in Madras & Mysore.—Mesta (Bimlipatam Jute) produced in Madras and Mysore is again considered to be inferior to mesta produced in West Bengal, Bihar or Orissa. It rarely finds an outlet in Calcutta market and is generally consumed by local mills. In our view, no useful purpose will be served by further increasing the production of Bimlipatam jute in Madras and Mysore unless the mill industry expands there. As the transport cost to Calcutta is high, it will obviously not be economical for the cultivators to export their produce to Calcutta.

5.15. Mesta Production in Bombay and Madhya Pradesh.—Some mesta (Ambadi) is also grown in Bombay and Madhya Pradesh. The production has recently shown a marked increase. In these two States, mesta is generally grown along with cotton; planting being done either in the same line or after a few lines of cotton. Mesta cultivation in these States is thus not done on any commercial scale and rarely does a cultivator grow it as a single crop. There are certain areas in Madhya Pradesh, e.g. Chhattisgarh area, Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg, Bastar, etc., where mesta cultivation can be encouraged provided market facilities are ensured. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to grow mesta in these States only in such areas from where the purchase can be conveniently and economically transported to Calcutta. We understand that even for the consumption of a local mill in Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh, the local production of mesta is not sufficient and it would be useful if its production is encouraged in some of the areas mentioned above so as to meet the demand of the local mill industry. Any large scale production of mesta either in Madhya Pradesh or in Bombay, however, does not seem to us to be economically feasible or desirable until and unless adequate and cheap transport to consuming areas can be provided.

5.16. Plant Protection Measures.—We have mentioned earlier that Hibiscus Sabdariffa, is more susceptible to plant diseases. If adequate plant protection measures can be taken, it would be more desirable to produce *Hibiscus Cannabinus* than *Hibiscus Sabdariffa*. The cultivators will be benefited all the more because *Hibiscus Cannabinus* occupies land for only about 4 months and a second crop may be grown. The fibre is also relatively strong and white. We feel, therefore, that adequate plant protection measures should be taken immediately to protect *Hibiscus Cannabinus* from plant diseases. The Indian Central Jute Committee may intensify their plant protection measures and bring home to the cultivators the desirability of growing *Hibiscus Cannabinus* instead of *Hibiscus Sabdariffa*. Simultaneously, attempts may also be made to improve the quality of *Hibiscus Sabdariffa* wherever it is being grown. This can be done by using better seeds and taking more care in the retting of the fibre. The Agricultural and Technological Research Institutes of the Indian

Central Jute Committee may also take up the problem of improving the quality and strength of *Hibiscus Sabdariffa* and encourage the use of better seeds for the cultivation of this fibre. If these two pronged measures, viz. the protecting of *Hibiscus Cannabinus* from diseases and improving the quality and strength of *Hibiscus Sabdariffa*, are taken effectively, much of the prejudice against the use of mesta in the manufacture of jute goods will be removed and the problem of mesta, as it presents itself today, may disappear in future.