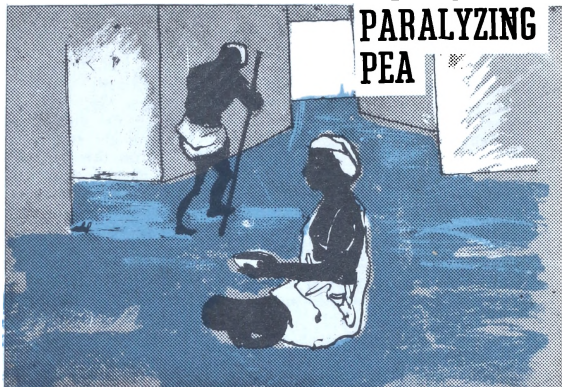


INDIA'S PARALYZING PEA



INDIAN scientists are warning that much of their country's farmlands have been sown with a food crop that may cripple millions. For over 25 years researchers have suspected a link between the small black pea-like plant that is the main diet in central and northern India and a disease that makes strong farmers cripples. Although the crop should be banned, however, science fears that many families for whom it means subsistence will continue to grow and eat it.

The plant that is the trouble-

maker is called khesari dhal. Over four million acres are sown with it. In Bihar, in north-east Asia, and Madhya Pradesh in central India, it constitutes 40-50 percent of the people's diet. Its seeds, mixed with other grains, are baked into chapatties—thin round bread. Khesari dhal is used also for cattle fodder, because in drought time it is the only plant that will grow in parched land.

Much credit, however, is given the theory that the common paralysis, Lathyrism, is traceable to the plant. The germ or

virus which causes the disease has not been isolated; yet the disease never occurs in the absence of the plant. Years of experiment have convinced researchers that the disease is caused either by an ingredient of the plant or by some reaction in the seed when it is stored in peasants' unbaked earthenware pots.

IN SOME areas it is estimated that from 6 to 8 percent of the population suffer from the disease; especially men between 20-30 years of age may be permanently crippled. Madras and Kerala have already banned the crop; and others have been advised to do the same.

"*Lathyrus sativus*," to use its Latin designation, is a grass pea that must be sown annually. It grows to a height of 30 inches and is widely used for human food and forage. Sometimes it is called the Indian pea.

Seeds of similar plants in North Africa and southern Europe commonly poison humans and animals and sometimes lead to fatalities. In 1884 the pea was discovered to have poisoned 35-75 cart horses owned by a resident of Liverpool, England.

There are also records of the peas having harmed cattle, sheep and pigs, and of their having caused pigeons to lose the power of flight.

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Did You Know?

What kind of snake is a "glass" snake?

A glass snake is not a snake at all, but a legless lizard that parts with its tail when pursued. The tail continues to wriggle for some time and holds the attention of the enemy while the lizard escapes.

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Where is it that people prefer black teeth to white ones?

In the East Indies. Some of the natives there chew betel nuts, and by the time they are 12 years old, their teeth are completely black from the stains. When these people grow older and need false teeth, they naturally prefer to have black ones.

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