

History of Coir Industry

Coir is the only natural fibre that does not get cultivated solely to extract the coir whereas jute and sisal are grown only to produce the fibres and in turn, the spun and woven products. Fibres like jute, sisal, cotton etc are derived from short cropping plants whereas coir originates from the near perennial coconut palm.

The coconut palm has been the subject of great adulation and admiration across the world and down the ages. This is perhaps the only tree, which has a systematic recorded history dating back to nearly 3000 years before the birth of Christ. Botanists say that the coconut was domesticated in Neolithic, Stone Age, times. When the 1st Ice Age has frozen much of the waters of the world reducing the distance between the islands and continents, seafaring tribes found it easy to move between landmasses. They carried coconuts for food and water during their voyages and planted whatever was left over in their new home.

There are several legends associated with the origin of this wonder palm in many countries. The origin of coir industry dates back to pre-historic times, but it is only during the 19th century that coir products were increasingly introduced to the other parts of the world from the countries of their origin. In Indian mythology, it is believed that this is one of the five wish giving trees that emerged after the churning of the might oceans by the Gods.

According to the Indian Coconut Committee's "History and Home of Coconut" published in September 1954, the coconut palm originated in Sri Lanka. In another view, the coconuts drifted in the sea from Polynesia and found new homes in many parts of the world. According to early Greek Chronicles, it was Megasthenes, Ambassador of the Seluces Nicater, who told the Indian King, Chandra Gupta about the Coconut Palm, he found in Sri Lanka in 300 BC. Arab writers of 11th century AD referred to the uses of coir as ships cables, fenders and rigging. "Marco Polo's celebrated travelogue of the 12th century mentioned on the uses to which coir fibre and mats were put in use in the sailing vessels of Arabs. He later saw the land where Arabs brought their coir and recorded how it was made out of the fibre from the coconut husk.

During the 13th century there was evidence of coir yarn being used in building ships in the Persian Gulf. When Portuguese Admiral Vasco da Gamma sailed in to Kerala, in the late 15th century, he must have seen this multipurpose fibre. Some where in the historical archives in Lisbon, there should be reference to coir. Coir is used for caulking, for sealing the space between the planks and for making ropes for sails and hawsers to tie ships and hold them during the tidal waves.

The coir industry was in U.K before the 2nd half of the 19th century. In 1840 Captain Widely, in co-operation with Captain Logan and Mr. Thomas Treolar founded the well-known Carpet firm of Treolar and Sons in Ludgate Hill

It is likely that both India and Sri Lanka were the first countries in the world to have discovered the multiple uses of coconut fibre: coir.

Coir fibre and yarn was therefore, known beyond the shores of India from ancient times. The coir industry, which forms the main plank of the economy of the coastal areas of Kerala, is one of the oldest and most traditional industries in the state. The geographical location of this area providing a salubrious climate for the large scale cultivation of coconut palms and the winding network of rivers, canals, lakes, lagoons and estuaries is an enormous interconnected, web of water ways, Virtual forests of coconut palm spread across these flat, green lands which is providing further a unique and distinct facility for the retting of coconut husks, that constitute the basic raw material for the industry, have helped in concentrating this industry in and around coastal area. These natural facilities, which do not seem to exist as such anywhere in the other large coconut producing countries have been fully made use of by the generations of men and women who inhabit this part of the country.



Marco polo

Alleppey, is better known as the Venice of the East.

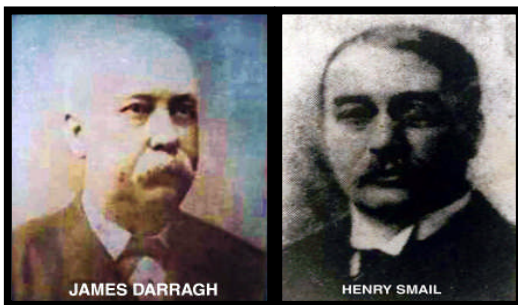


Not that coir was something new to Alleppey, Coir had been in use in various forms and coir making was prevalent around the world from Belgium Congo to Guam and from Venezuela to Eritrea, a long time before Darrah's factory came up in Alleppey. The hop fields in England that provided raw material to the beer industry used coir ropes in large quantities on the farms, so did the olive oil presses in Turkey, bringing out the versatility of the coconut fibre.

The manufacture of coir fibre and coir yarn was traditional old industry in the coastal areas of the native states of Travancore and Cochin and the coir was purchased and exported by the traders from the Calcutta port. Using handlooms used the yarn so exported for the manufacture of cheap floor coverings in the schools for the blind.

The golden textured Indian Coir Fibre, which earned it the unofficial brand name 'golden fibre', captured European and world markets in no time.

Since coir yarn and fibre could be most economically moved by well developed water transport to Alleppey, a thinly populated, with communication facilities by road was sparse, but had facilities for shipping the product, with two canals connecting the port and backwaters. , Coir industrial units came to be



JAMES DARRAH

HENRY SMAIL

concentrated in and around Alleppey due to the availability of cheap labour and the abundance of raw material.

Convinced by the potentiality of the fibre and yarn, Mr. Darragh, came to Alleppey, which was the chief port of the state and started a manufacturing unit with the establishment of the first coir factory in India at Alleppey in 1859 by Mr. James Darragh, an American of Irish Origin. He enlisted the help of the foreign trader called Henry Smail and the factory known as “Darragh Smail & Company”.

From then on, there was no turning back. The big corporate of that era soon established coir factories in Alleppey, Kollam, Kozhikode, Kochi and other parts of Kerala. Success of Darragh Smail brought many other Europeans in to Alleppey and industrial heavy weights of the time, including, Pierce Lesley & Co, William Goodacare & Sons, Madura Co., Coir Yarn Textiles, Bombay Co., Volkart Brothers, Aspinwall & Co moved in to tap the potential offered by the golden fibre, and Alleppey was soon a house hold name all over Europe. The royal family of Holland formed the Royal United Carpet Factory at Aroor and the royal family of Travancore became the major shareholders in the Aspinwall & Co., which employed large number of workers.

Native entrepreneurs were not far behind and large Indian firm also took shape. Alleppey Co., C. George Peter & Sons, Pitchu Iyer & Sons, Coir Floor Furnishing Co., Empire Coir Works, Commercial Emporium, Charankattu Coir Mfg. Co, Travancore Mats & Matting Co., Devaswomchira Coir Fabrics, Kochu Pillai & Sons, Koncherry Coir Factories were a few of the large establishment of native origin established then.

This was perhaps what established the industry so firmly in India and particularly, in Kerala, even though coconut production was significantly high in several other countries like Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The need for a cheap insulate to maintain comfortable living environment in residential buildings in UK and elsewhere in the continent and the linkage of India with British rule endeared investors from England to expand the product sector of the Industry at a suitable location in the southern most part of India – Kerala – the home of coir. In fact, a key factor that helped the establishment of the coir spinning industry in Kerala is the presence of brackish backwaters and lagoons. Brackish waters had to be replenished by fresh water at frequent intervals to wash away the water contaminated in the process of retting of husks, and Kerala was naturally endowed with this facility also.



By 1967, a little over a hundred years after the first coir factory was established, as many as, 1402 of the 1831 coir units in Kerala were in Alleppey, establishing the coastal town as the unchallenged head quarters of the coir industry.

By this time, the domestic coir industry had spread its wings, with coir factories coming up in several states including Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Goa, and there was no doubting the fact that Indian Coir Industry was on broad footing.

As K.R. Lawrence Bandey, MBE who set up the William Goodacre operations in Alleppey reminisces, “Around the middle of the 20th century, there was not a house in Europe that did not use some coir article.”

Process of Disintegration

Coir Industry in India is an export oriented one from very early days and the prosperity of the industry is therefore dependent on the foreign buyers. It may appear quite paradoxical that where in every other industry attempts are made towards greater modernisation in production methods, the coir industry has been the sad victim of a retrograde trend, The organised sector, which comprised of the large scale factories began to disintegrate at an amazingly incredible pace.

After World War II, the organised factory sector had grown into a dimension, which provided employment to the extent of nearly one lakh of workers. Several large-scale units were going through the process of establishing themselves in the export trade and it was hoped that the industry was making headway towards increased productivity, greater employment potential and rapid diversification. But this was not to be. In the decades that have gone by subsequent to 1940's the diminishing returns from coir manufacturing activity owing to escalation in cost of raw material and increase in manufacturing costs resulted in the established manufacturing units curtailing their manufacturing activities, with phased retrenchment of workers engaged in the industry which led to the establishment of decentralised manufacturing sector of the coir industry by the enterprise of the retrenched labour of one time established centralised production sector.

In the beginning the small scale producers of coir products were given encouragement and were financed by exporting companies. Now the Small-scale manufacturers too have taken the path of the Trade Unions, forcing the industry to a stand still and that too, very often, with disastrous consequences to the Coir Industry.

The large-scale units, a few of which still exists and all of who are exporters have to substantially depend for the supplies on the small manufacturers. Repeated labour unrest and agitations, absence of a strong co-operative sector, a steady decline in the export earnings and replacement of coir products by more competent synthetic materials in the foreign markets have further tended to undermine the existence and stability of Coir Industry in the 1980's.

Coir Industry is exclusively a cottage Industry on its spinning side. On the manufacturing side of finished goods, it is partly cottage wise and partly factory wise.

The Co-operative Sector also made its mark, organizing individual households involved in coir making activities and reaping the benefits of organised buying of raw material and shared common facilities. Kerala alone has 620 primary societies and 43 manufacturing societies.

The Indian Coir Industry has been fortunate to get another boost in the form of the ever-increasing awareness about eco protection. Coir, being a natural fibre that is environment friendly in the strictest sense of the term, is now seen as the fibre of the future. The eco friendly quality of coir will help it to hold its ground even as it battles competition from synthetic fibres.

The Indian Coir Industry is now on the come back trail, after the sluggishness over the past three decades. The export figures have moved up from Rs. 250 crores in 1997 to Rs 605.17 crores during 2006-07. Those figures may not look awesome in value terms, but the real significance lies in the fact that the industry employs a staggering 6 lakhs people directly or indirectly. Equally significant is the fact that most of these people are from the economically disadvantaged classes, and as much as 80 % of the workers are women.

Mechanization is no more opposed by the labourers and the winds of liberalization are sweeping the industry. The Indian Coir Industry, that many thought was breathing its last in the early Nineties, is waking up to a new dawn.

Coir Processing Units in India (State Wise)

Sl No	State	Fibre extraction unit	Spinning & rope making unit	Product manufacturing unit	Rubberized coir unit	Pith processing unit	Curled coir unit	Others	Total
1	Kerala	47	395	7323	20	5	-	4	7794
2	Tamil Nadu	708	340	30	10	38	180	1	1307
3	Karnataka	174	191	113	15	-	62	1	556
4	Andhra Pradesh	111	134	45	9	1	7	-	307
5	Orissa	21	253	116	3	-	5	30	428
6	Pondicderry	4	26	7	-	-	-	-	37
7	West Bengal	5	8	10	7	-	-	4	34
8	Lakshadweep	7	9	4	-	-	6	-	26
9	Goa	3	-	3	1	-	1	-	8
10	Assam	3	3	1	2	-	-	-	9
11	Tripura	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
12	Andaman & Nicobar	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	2
13	Maharashtra	1	1	-	9	1	-	3	15
14	Gujarat	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
15	Rajasthan	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	4

16	Uttar Pradesh	-	-	-	8	-	-	6	14
17	Madhya Pradesh	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	14
18	Delhi	-	-	-	11	-	-	6	17
19	Punjab	-	-	-	3	-	-	2	5
20	Jammu & Kashmir	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2
21	Haryana	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2
	Total	1085	1363	7652	109	45	261	58	10573

Note: *In the above table, Small sized spinning, tiny, and household units have not been accounted for, as they are in the Unorganized Sector. The number of such units are approximated at 3,00,000.*

CCRI Library