

CEYLON'S GREATEST INDUSTRY

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COCONUT palms are so numerous, so commonplace, so much a part of the landscape that they are taken for granted and we need occasionally to be reminded of their vital significance and tremendous importance in the economy of Ceylon.

It is perhaps excusable that it is not understood or appreciated here in Ceylon that to the visiting tourist the exotic coconut palm, waving majestically in the warm sea breezes, spells Romance and Adventure. The coconut palm is indeed the most beautiful tree in the world, and the golden palm-fringed beaches of the Southern Province, in their setting of red rocks and azure skies, rival those of Hawaii, Florida and California. It is, I consider, the principal asset of our fourth major industry, yet this fact is barely realised and is certainly not exploited.



For many years, the American public has been taught through the medium of the film, the novel and the press and through persistent and colourful advertising to associate the pineapple with the colour, beauty of romance of the Hawaiian Islands. This not only serves to sell canned pineapple but it also attracts tourists to Hawaii in their hundreds of thousands, and tourism is in consequence the first industry of this prosperous small country of only half a million people.

In Ceylon similarly, it would not be a difficult matter to arrange regular stop-over facilities for round-the-world tourists, so that they could enjoy a restful and romantic holiday in a luxury hotel among the coconuts of the Southern Province instead of being rushed round the island on long, hot and exhausting tours of ancient monuments and temples.

The special idea I want to leave with you to-day, however, is the leading importance of the coconut industry. It may interest you to know that it is neither tea, nor rubber, but coconuts which provides the index of the national income to the Income Tax Department. This is because it is the largest, the most broad-based and the most fundamental industry in Ceylon. Not only is the area under coconuts far greater than that of any other crop, but the industry exports a greater tonnage of products than does any other industry. Last year these reached the all-time record of 273,474 tons. In addition, an equal quantity of coconuts, coconut foods and coconut products is consumed here in Ceylon.

The coconut palm has been variously described as the "Tree of Life," the "Tree of Abundance" and the "Tree of Plenty" because the sap, the leaves, the fruits, the trunk and the roots of this remarkable tree yield well over a hundred products of domestic, industrial and commercial importance. Well may it be claimed to be the most useful tree in the world.

Ceylon's leading industry has the widest ramifications of any industry in Ceylon. It is not merely a matter of planting, cultivation and harvesting as in the case of the other two leading industries, it is a vast loosely knit organisation which provides employment for a large army of workers in copra, charcoal, tile and lime manufacture; oil and fibre milling; desiccated coconut production, margarine manufacture and soap-making; rope-winding, mat and net weaving, and broom and basket making; house-building and the production of furniture and upholstery; and the manufacture of pharmaceutical and toilet preparations, the distillation of arrack and the production of gin, liqueurs and medicated wines.

Coconuts are, in my opinion, still the soundest long-term investment in Ceylon; tea may be overproduced, synthetic rubber is threatening the natural product, but coconuts are still the "Consols of the East" and likely to remain so, because agriculturists are fighting a losing battle on the Food Front. There may be a temporary set-back to the demand for oils and fats with the sudden and dramatic development of the new Synthetic Detergents Industry in Britain and the United States, but the compensating factor which is now increasing demand, has been the growing consumption of margarine in both these countries. Britain to-day consumes over twice as much margarine as it did before the war, because the chemist has now made it an attractive and completely acceptable substitute for butter.

The Coconut Industry too has turned the corner; it is no longer a declining asset; on the contrary the crop last year was the highest on record. Coconut growers in recent years have benefited not only by the high prices of coconut products in world markets but also by the relatively higher prices within this country, due to the intense competition for the available supplies of nuts by the coconut mills, which has rocketted prices.

The wise and far-seeing among the coconut growers have ploughed back a part of their profits, as advised by the former Director of the Coconut Research Scheme. Our advisory work, leaflet propaganda and technical instruction are now beginning to show results. During the past five years, crops have steadily increased until to-day they are nearly double what they were in 1947, when disaster seemed certain. Nevertheless, there is still heaps of room for improvement.

More attention has now to be paid by Ceylon to the production of wealth than to schemes for spending. The goose that lays the golden eggs can be made still fatter and still productive; production can be doubled again, if the Coconut Rehabilitation Scheme is implemented without delay and in such a way that it will do the greatest good to the greatest number.

Unlike Tea and Rubber, the Coconut Industry consists mainly of small units. It is reckoned that of one million acres under coconuts, about 700,000 acres are small properties, less than 20 acres in extent; some are owned by a single proprietor, some are owned in combination, and some jointly by several owners. It is because of this fragmentation that the Industry has never received complete or adequate service or assistance in proportion to its paramount importance in the economy of the country.

For many years, it was only the larger estates and properties with English-speaking superintendents which were in a position to benefit by our research and advice and are now in consequence the most efficiently maintained. But to-day, by working through the Co-operative Movement and the Rural Development Societies, our advisory officers are at last reaching the small-holders. A lot remains to be done and the difficulties are great because our research has to be carried out in English and translated into Sinhalese and Tamil in the form of planting manuals and advisory leaflets.

Also we haven't much money to do this, as we are still the worst financed of the three research institutes :—

Crops	Working Population	Acreage	Cess and Grant (1951) Rs.
Coconut	1,000,000	1,000,000	350,000
Tea	500,000	550,000	750,000
Rubber	250,000	650,000	1,500,000

If the work of the Institute is to be extended particularly in the field of agricultural education and instruction in support of the Coconut Rehabilitation Scheme, our present revenue is not sufficient. It was an irony of fate that the Institute was born in the trough of its deepest depression and in consequence of the inadequate financial provision then made, it was starved of funds for 21 years. The cess was increased in 1951 but our revenues are still not sufficient to meet the present needs of the Industry.

One last word. Do not look down on the Coconut Industry. It may be made up of small units, but it is nevertheless the most important industry in Ceylon and its research institute is the Mecca of people engaged in this and related industries, coming from all parts of the world. Remember then it is not tea, rubber and coconuts, but coconuts, tea and rubber. The coconut palm is the most beautiful and the most useful tree in the world, and the coconut industry is, I submit, Ceylon's greatest industry.

(Address to the Kandy District Planters' Association, 13th May, 1953)