



## PRESENT STATUS OF COIR INDUSTRY IN ALAPPUZHA, A STUDY ON HOUSEHOLD COIR UNITS

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*Abstract:* After 1947, when India became Independent, the large coir units, concentrated in Alappuzha region, were closed one by one by the foreign company proprietors and left the coir field. The workers, who were thrown out of employment, mobilized capital and purchased the looms of the closed units. Here started the history of modern coir industry in Alappuzha. During 1990's, the large factories demanded mechanization to reduce manpower and manage their foreign orders. Government also agreed that the process of modernizing traditional 'labour intensive' industries is a vital issue for developing countries. Thus, modernization and mechanization gradually decreased the number of small scale and household coir units in Alappuzha. The industry as a whole befitted the shift from manpower industry to machine power industry now. The modern coir industry is profitable as in the case of time and labour too. From coir fiber extraction to mat making, machines are taken over the works and this simplify human labour and interventions. With the new generation workers with technological skills may fit to this industry now and hence the traditional coir workers and industry has leave behind the remembrance of a bygone era.

**Index Terms - Traditional Coir Industry, Modernisation, Mécanisation, Household Loom Unit, Coir Yarn Spinning, Defibering**

### I. INTRODUCTION

Alappuzha, the ancient city in Kerala is the cradle of coir industry in the country. Coir yarns have been manufactured from time immemorial throughout the coastal belt of Kerala (M. Kumaraswami Pillai, 2014). Because of the prominence in international market and a long history, it is of little wonder that the chief cottage industry in the state happens to be the coir industry. The manufacture of coir fibre and coir yarn was a 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 (Stephen Mani). The characteristic of the industry during that time is that it is traditional, labour-intensive and of a self-employed production structure.

With the opening of the first coir factory in Alappuzha (1859) by an Ireland born American, James Darragh, the process of coir making in India grew from an unorganised cottage industry to a professional and modernized industrial activity. As a result, the coir industry in Alappuzha was gained global fame so as more factories and workers were flocking to the industry. But soon after Independence, the foreigners who owned the factories in Alappuzha-Cherthala belt left the scene after handing over the units to a group of local industrialists and workers unions (Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment, 2016). The grave fact is that these new owners couldn't manage the business properly and generate more incomes and job opportunities.

**METHOD:** This study used the triangulation approach of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study used both primary as well as secondary data. For collecting required primary data from the veteran and present coir workers and owners of coir units, questionnaire and interview techniques are used. The study focused on the nature and structure of labour (Portfolio of work) in the coir industry. It evaluated the changes in the nature and structure of labour from traditional to modern coir industry.

### POST INDEPENDENCE SMALL-SCALE AND HOUSEHOLD COIR UNITS

After 1947, when India became Independent, the large coir units, concentrated in Alappuzha region, were closed one by one by the foreign company proprietors and left the coir field (Report, Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment, March 2016). Some of these factories were purchased by local business men but they could not revive the industry. The workers, who were thrown out of employment, mobilized capital and purchased the looms of the closed units (KILE, March 2016). With them, they established production units with 5 – 7 looms in work sheds erected in their house premises. Soon after this development, the local proprietors of the coir factories, having experienced failure in reviving the big units, changed their strategy (KILE, March 2016). They converted themselves into exporters, procured orders from foreign and domestic markets, placed orders to the recently set up small-units, got the products manufactured according to their specifications and took to marketing. This they continue even today.

Thus coir industry emerges as the largest employment generating industry employing a staggering more than half a million people in the country (K.Manoharan and R. Ramesh chandran, 2004). Equally momentous is the fact that most of them are from the economically poor classes and as much as 80 % of the workers are women in the industry. Moreover, thousands of entrepreneurs are directly and indirectly involved in activities ranging from the manufacture of coir fibre to producing and marketing of value-added products of coir (Dr.P.Mohanasundaram). These new breed of entrepreneurs find the scope offered by the industry with comparatively low investment an exciting opportunity.

By 1990, in Alappuzha district, there are 29 major coir factories with more than 200 power looms and electrically driven machines (Coir Board, 2015). Apart from these big factories, around 450 Registered Coir units and Unregistered Coir units are functioning in Small Scale and Household pattern. A list of Registered Coir units in Alappuzha District was obtained from the District Industries Centre, Alappuzha and a total of 152 Registered Coir units were functioning as on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 in the study area. But this was very huge decline in number when compared to 1970's. Household coir units ranging from 1 to 8 mat production machine (non hydraulic). Apart from mat production work, household units were engaged in coir fibre extraction, rope making and other allied works related to the industry (Coir Board, 2018).

The household and small scale coir units (Registered and unregistered) were receives order from big factories or warehouses. As per this order, they purchase raw materials from the market and produce the coir mats. But essential raw materials like coir fibre, coir and bleaching materials were not producing in the local market, they were importing from Tamil Nadu. So these imported raw materials were distributing the above depots or big factories at their profit rate. The finished products as per order, receives the depots at a low price comparable to the basic price fixed by the authorities. Thus the small scale and household units are exploited in two ways. By the end of 1980's, there were frequent strikes and protests against this exploitation. The common workers in small scale and household units agitated for fair price for their products and reasonable or subsidized rate raw materials. Government interventions were nominal and probably protecting the interests of the exporters.

At this point of time, large factories demanded mechanization to reduce manpower and manage their foreign orders. Government also agreed that the process of modernizing traditional 'labour intensive' industries is a vital issue for developing countries. Thus, modernization and mechanization gradually decreased the number of small scale and household coir units in Alappuzha. Now there is only few registered small scale coir units are functioning. Other small scale and household units were abandoned and the workers were migrated to other industries.

#### CURRENT STATUS OF FIBER EXTRACTION

In traditional method, the husks separated from the nuts are retted in lagoons and ponds up to ten months. The retted husks are then beaten with wooden mallets manually to produce the coir fiber. The fibre is later spun into yarn on traditional spinning wheels called "Ratts", ready for dyeing and weaving into myriad shades of floor coverings. But due to time lag and pollution problems, retting process in lagoons and ponds are now almost stopped. Instead, using chemicals, retting process is done in huge tanks.

The recent practice is that the husk is directly sent into the defibering machine. The machine separates the fiber from the husk. This extracted husk is again refined to remove the impurities and the hard coconut skin. A different machine is used to refine the husk. The refined husk is gathered and piled which is again sent for the twine making process. With the mechanisation of the coir sector, big units with a capacity of defibering 8,000 husks a day sprang up at Pollachi.

With retting and manual extraction becoming more and more difficult and costly, the yarn-spinning industry started to use more and more un-retted Tamil Nadu fiber. Initially, it was a 10% TN fiber mixed with 90% Kerala retted fiber and this equation slowly shifted to 100% TN fiber for most qualities of yarn (KILE, March 2016). The Kerala coir industry now is essentially dependent on Tamil Nadu for fiber. With the gradual disappearance of the retting activity in Kerala due to ecological and social reasons, the scope of fiber production in the State is very minimal (Coir Board, 2018).

Period	Quantity of Export in Tons	Value in Rs. Lakhs
1999-2000	809.88	117.16
2004-2005	1,350.45	186.03
2009-2010	73,074.93	9,742.03
2014-2015	219,103.00	41,923.34
2019-2020	392,179.00	61,765.95

**Table 1:** Current Status of Fiber Import from TN

Source: FICEA

Now, the fiber extraction is mainly a mechanical process done by highly advanced fiber mills, mostly concentrated in Tamil Nadu. The staple length is shorter, leading to more shedding and poor quality of the product (KILE, March 2016). There is a need to develop a process of fiber extraction that can give better quality fiber for the spinning and product sector. With this objective, Kerala Kudumbashree Mission (State Poverty Eradication Mission) started Coir Defibering units in association with Kerala Coir Machine Manufacturing Company in all potential Panchayats of Kerala. The end product will be bought back by Coir Fed. The project outlines 28 defibering units in Kerala but started only one unit yet. The following table shows the project details.

Sl. No	District	No of places identified	No places where inspection completed	No of places approved	No of units started operation
1	Thiruvananthapuram	3	2	2	0
2	Kollam	6	3	0	0
3	Pathanamthitta	1	1	0	0
4	Alappuzha	5	5	4	0
5	Kottayam	1	1	1	0
6	Idukki	1	0	0	0
7	Ernakulam	7	4	2	0
8	Thrissur	7	7	4	0
9	Palakkad	5	5	3	0
10	Malappuzram	11	6	1	0
11	Kozhikkod	8	7	5	0
12	Wayanad	0	0	0	0
13	Kannur	6	4	2	1
14	Kasargod	4	3	1	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>1</b>

Table II – Coir Defibering Unit Status- Kudumbashree

Source: Kudumbashree Website

### CURRENT STATUS OF SPINNING

Most of the coir spinning done by hand mostly was in the cottage sector till 2000. The co-operative societies and the private sector agents collect this yarn and supply it to the manufacturers and the exporters. With the development of mechanical spinning machines in Tamil Nadu, aggressive efforts are being made by their entrepreneurs to produce and supply mechanically-spun yarn to Kerala (KILE, March 2016). This is a grave threat to the hand-spinning division from the TN machine spun yarn. Hence, considerable investment needs to be done in Kerala in the immediate future, to increase mechanical spinning. If not, the spinning sector will have the same fate as the fiber sector and the handspun yarn will not be able to compete with the machine-spun yarn.

### CURRENT STATUS OF HOUSEHOLD LOOM UNITS

There are large numbers of small-producers (household units) in Kerala who weave products in the premises of their houses. They generally have 2 to 8 looms in a shed. The products made by them are supplied to the cooperative societies or exporters. The price of the products was determined by big traders, not taking into consideration of the actual cost of production plus a reasonable profit margin or net income for the units. Gradually, these units started incurring debts. This situation motivated the proprietors of these small units to organize themselves into a strong association and collectively bargained for fair price for their products. The Coir Board was entrusted with the task of periodically determining the sales-price of the products of the small-scale units and also the minimum export price. Somehow or other, these arrangements did not work effectively. But with the installation of more and more tufting machines, this sector is on its way to extinction.

Sri. Pavithran, President, Kerala State Small-scale Coir Manufacturers' Federation, said that the current status of the small-scale sector in Kerala is not at all satisfactory. Partial mechanization of the handloom units has resulted in loss of jobs for about 10,000 workers. About 90% of the workers are in the small units and about 32,000 are engaged in related activities. Exporters employ a good number of them in finishing work. Another factor is that the exporters, in general, prefer and promote machine-made products and so, give orders to such units - not to handloom units. The same attitude reflects at exhibitions and publicity especially, at international fairs. Lastly, a good number of units are weak and do not have even adequate working capital. Payments due to them are often delayed by the Government and Coirfed.

Period	No of Units	No of Workers
1981-1990	2900*	47000*
1991-2000	2200*	24000*
2001-2010	420*	12000*
2011-2020	60*	480*

No of Small Scale Units (Based on survey conducted by the investigator)

\*Reported numbers, not based on enumeration method

The household units are engaged mostly in spinning, weaving and fiber extraction work; of which spinning accounts for 75% of household employment. Interestingly, three-fourths of all coir workers are women (Coir Board, 2018). The characteristics of the household unit is that it is traditional, labour intensive and of a self-employed production structure. It has become the main source of non-agricultural employment in the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Isaac et al., 1992). The exact number of these micro units in Kerala is not available.

- their earnings are very low
- being women, could work only 4 – 5 hours a day after the domestic chores
- they lack capital to mechanise the ratt with an electric motor which can increase production and productivity
- they do not get any financial support as grant or subsidy from the State Government for doing business
- Irregular employment is a major problem in this cottage industry
- Shortage of raw material is another problem

Due to the above mentioned problems and the adverse effects of mechanization of the industry, Household units were totally moved out from the area. The labors from household and small scale units were migrated to other industries.

## CONCLUSION

The main driving force of the coir industry in Kerala is the exporters and the managements of the large companies (Federation of Indian Coir Exporters Association) in the private sector who successfully explore opportunities in foreign markets. According to the managements/proprietors of the large units especially in Alappuzha and its suburban areas, they experience certain functional constraints, unwittingly imposed by their workers/unions. Almost all big players in the industry have opened units in Tamil Nadu and are increasingly shifting their base to the neighboring state.

N C John and Sons, a leading manufacturer of coir mats, has opened a huge facility for manufacturing tufted coir mats in Tamil Nadu while Travancore Mats and Mattings has started operations at Bhavani. A unit of the Travancore Coco Tuft will begin functioning in Tirunelveli next year. Kerala Balers has started a unit in Kanyakumari while the Aspinwall and Co Travancore Ltd has migrated to Pollachi. D C Mills, Charankattu Coir Manufacturing Co, Maitra Home Decor and Techno Exports are some of the big names in the process of shifting. "In Tamil Nadu, the labour cost is very low. Here we've to pay Rs 900, including allowances, to a worker per day while in Tamil Nadu, it is just Rs 368 per day. The government there is very supportive and the process of getting an industry sanction is hassle-free," said Travancore Coco Tuft MD V V Pavithran.

Tamil Nadu started mechanised spinning companies which supplied long and evenly spun yarn, tailor-made for Kerala's modern units. This spelt doom for the traditional coir workers in the state. From a business point of view, mechanization of the production process is a must in a competitive world market. Workers and their unions are fully aware of this and hence, they welcome it. The State and the Central Governments have already taken several steps to promote appropriate technology through various schemes. But, due to improper implementation, the targeted degree of mechanization has not taken place, unlike the situation in Tamil Nadu.

Here in Kerala also, the large industrial units in Alappuzha and Cherthala are reasonably mechanized and function efficiently with high quality products, marketable in foreign countries. The problem persists mainly in the co-operative sector, small units owned by individuals and in the household units. Mere distribution of soft loans/ subsidies/machines is not going to solve the problem. Distribution is not implementation. The Coir Inspectors should be a little more alert and watchful and ensure the expected outcome. The initiative of Coir Minister T M Thomas Isaac to bail out the industry is commendable. It's providing employment to around 30,000 workers in the state and the government has the responsibility to protect the livelihood of the poor.

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